Buddhism in Myanmar
A Short History

by Roger Bischoff

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Buddhism in Myanmar

Myanmar, or Burma, is.one of the major countries following Theravāda Buddhism today. In recent years Myanmar has attained special eminence in the Buddhist world. Between 1954 and 1956 the country hosted the Sixth Great Buddhist Council, and it has also been the source from which several of the foremost systems of Vipassana meditation have spread to the rest of the world.

This Wheel booklet offers a short history of Buddhism in Myanmar from its origins until the beginning of the colonial period in the late 19th century. The material has been sifted and organised from the point of view of a practising Buddhist. It is intended to show how Buddhism influenced the development of the Myanmar people until the Theravāda Buddhist teachings became their second nature.

Roger Bischoff is an Assistant Teacher at the International Meditation Centre in England and a long-time student of the Burmese language and culture.

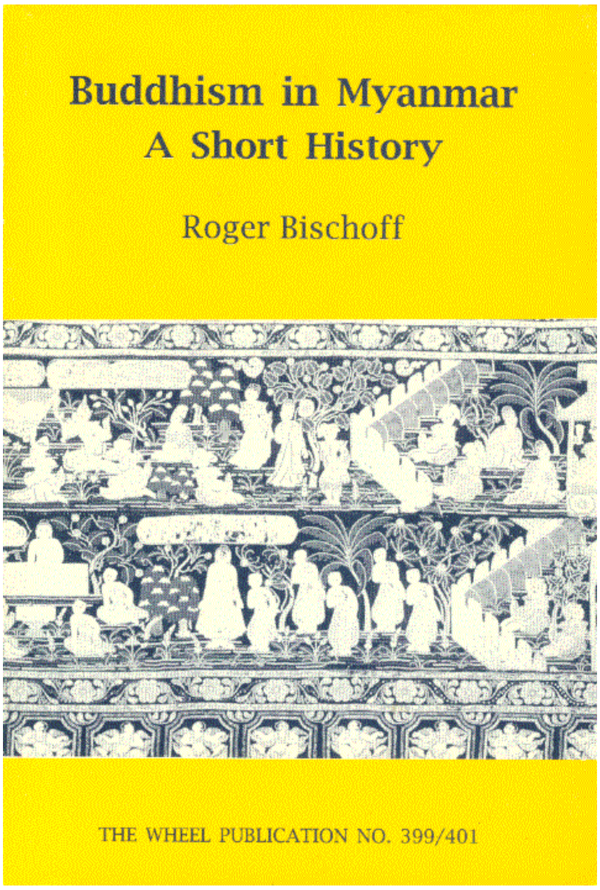
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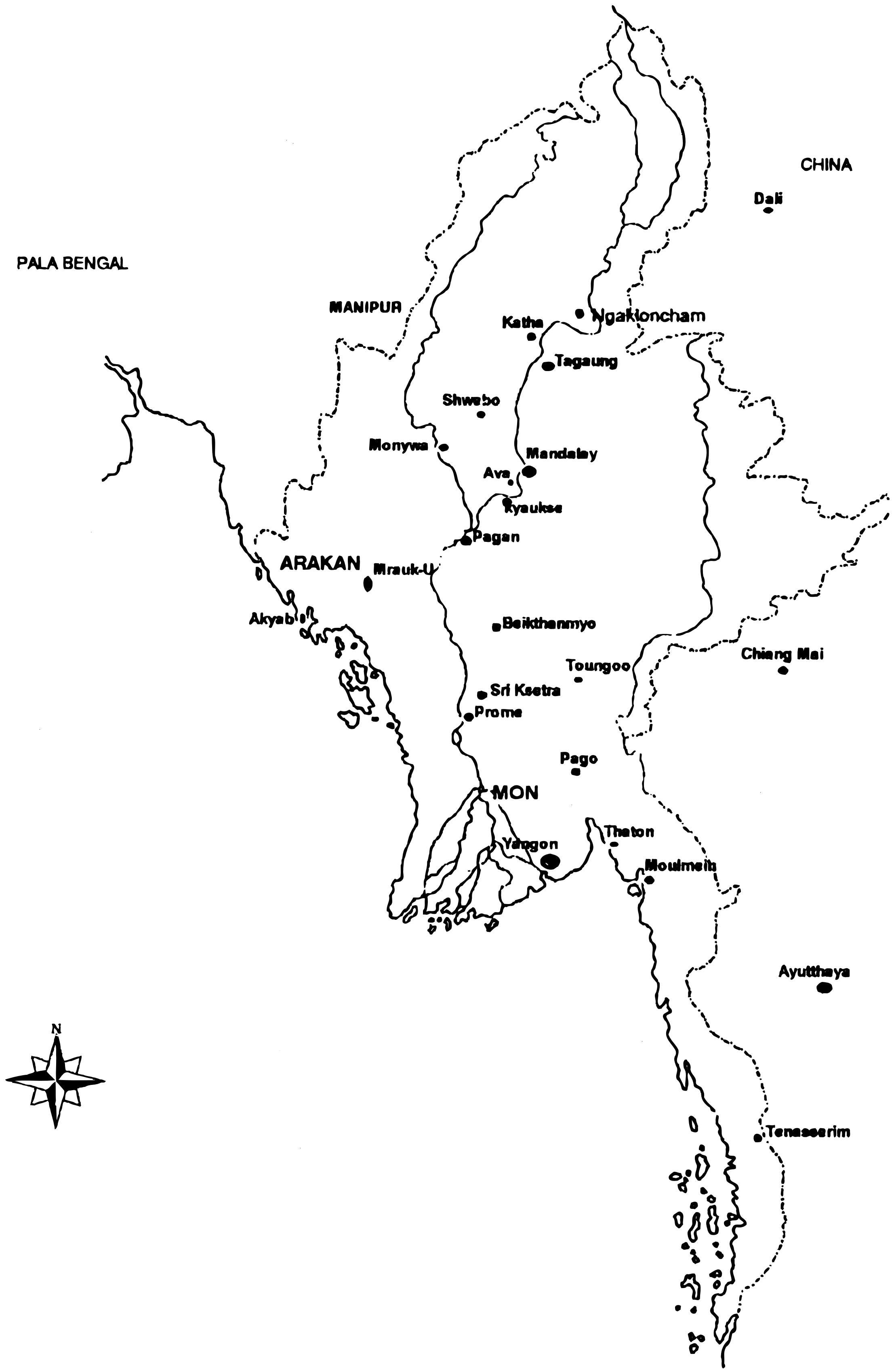
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• Touching Peace In Our Lives •

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Cover: Jātaka scene painting from Amarapura, Burma (1911). Australian National Gallery, Canberra.





CHINA
Dali
PALA BENGAL
MANIPUR
Ngakloncham
Katha
Tagaung
Shwebo
Monywa
Mandalay
Ava
Kyaukse
Pagan
ARAKAN
Mrauk-U
Akyab
Beikthanmyo
Toungoo
Chiang Mai
Sri Ksetra
Prome
Pago
MON
Thaton
Yangon
Moulmein
Ayutthaya
N
Tenasserim

Table of Contents

Preface

Myanmar, or Burma as the nation has been known throughout history, is one of the major countries following Theravāda Buddhism. In recent years Myanmar has attained special eminence as the host for the Sixth Buddhist Council, held in Yangon (Rangoon) between 1954 and 1956, and as the source from which two of the major systems of Vipassana meditation have emanated out into the greater world: the tradition springing from the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw of Thathana Yeiktha and that springing from Sayagyi U Ba Khin of the International Meditation Centre.

This booklet is intended to offer a short history of Buddhism in Myanmar from its origins through the country's loss of independence to Great Britain in the late nineteenth century. I have not dealt with more recent history as this has already been well documented. To write an account of the development of a religion in any country is a delicate and demanding undertaking and one will never be quite

satisfied with the result. This booklet does not pretend to be an academic work shedding new light on the subject. It is designed, rather, to provide the interested non-academic reader with a brief overview of the subject.

The booklet has been written for the Buddhist Publication Society to complete its series of Wheel titles on the history of the Sāsana in the main Theravāda Buddhist countries. The material has been sifted and organised from the point of view of a practising Buddhist. Inevitably it thus involves some degree of personal interpretation. I have given importance to sources that would be accorded much less weight in a strictly academic treatment of the subject, as I feel that in this case the oral tradition may well be more reliable than modern historians would normally admit.

One of the objectives of the narrative is to show that the Buddha's Teaching did not make a lasting impression on Myanmar immediately upon first arrival. The Sāsana had to be re-introduced or purified

again and again from the outside until Myanmar had matured to the point of becoming one of the main shrines where the Theravāda Buddhist teachings are preserved. The religion did not develop in Myanmar. Rather, the Myanmar people developed through the religion until the Theravāda faith became embedded in their culture and Pāli Buddhism became second nature to them.

I dedicate this work to my teachers, Mother Sayamagyi and Sayagyi U Chit Tin.

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Chapter 1
Earliest Contacts with Buddhism

Myanmar and its Peoples

There are four dominant ethnic groups in the recorded history of Myanmar: the Mon, the Pyu, the Myanmar, and the Shan.

Uncertainty surrounds the origins of the Mon; but it is clear that, at least linguistically, they are related to the Khmer.[1] What is known is that they settled in the south of Myanmar and Thailand while the Khmer made northern Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia their home. These two peoples were probably the first migrants to the region, apart from Indian merchants who established trading colonies along the coast. The Mon with their distinct language and culture competed for centuries with the Myanmar. However,

1. The Mon are also called Talaing, but this term is considered to be derogatory. It is thought to come from Telugu, a language of South Indian origin whose script the Mon adopted.

today their influence and language is limited to remote areas of the south.

The Pyu, like the Myanmar, are a people of Tibeto-Burman origin with a distinct culture and language. They lived in the area around Prome long before the Myanmar pushed into the plains of Myanmar from the north. Their language was closely related to the language of the Myanmar and was later absorbed by it. Their script was in use until about the fourteenth century, but was then lost.

The Myanmar people began to colonise the plains of Myanmar only towards the middle of the first millennium AD. They came from the mountainous northern regions and may well have originated in the Central Asian plains.

After the Myanmar, the Shan flooded in from the North, finally conquering the entire region of Myanmar and Thailand. The Thai people are descended from Shan tribes. The northeast region of modern Myanmar is still inhabited predominantly by Shan tribes.

The Region

In the sixth century BC, most of what we now know as Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia was sparsely populated. While migrants from the east coast of India had formed trading colonies along the coast of the Gulf of Martaban, these coastal areas of Myanmar and Thailand were also home to the Mon. By this time, the Khmer probably controlled Laos, Cambodia, and northern Thailand, while Upper Myanmar may already have been occupied to some extent by Myanmar tribes.

As these early settlers did not use lasting materials for construction, our knowledge of their civilisation remains scant. We do know, however, that their way of life was very simple — as it remains today in rural areas — probably requiring only wooden huts with palm-leaf roofs for habitation. We can assume that they were not organised into units larger than village communities and that they did not possess a written language. Their religion must have been some form of

nature worship or animism, still found today among the more remote tribes of the region.

There were also more highly developed communities of Indian origin, in the form of trading settlements located along the entire coast from Bengal to Borneo. In Myanmar, they were located in Thaton (Suddhammapura), Pegu (Ussa), Yangon (Ukkalā, then still on the coast), and Mrauk-U (Dhaññavati) in Arakan; also probably along the Tenasserim and Arakan coasts. These settlers had mainly migrated from Orissa on the northeastern coast of the Indian subcontinent, and also from the Deccan in the southeast. In migrating to these areas, they had also brought their own culture and religion with them. Initially, the contact between the Hindu traders and the Mon peasants must have been limited. However, the Indian settlements, their culture and traditions, were eventually absorbed into the Mon culture.

G.E. Harvey, in his *History of Burma*, relates a Mon legend which refers to the Mon fighting Hindu strangers who had come back to re-conquer the

country that had formerly belonged to them.[2] This Mon tale confirms the theory that Indian people had formed the first communities in the region but that these were eventually replaced by the Mon with the development of their own civilisation. As well as the Indian trading settlements, there were also some Pyu settlements, particularly in the area of Prome where a flourishing civilisation later developed.

Also, it is assumed that some degree of migration from India to the region of Tagaung and Mogok in Upper Myanmar had taken place through Assam and later through Manipur, but the "hinterland" was of course much less attractive to traders than the coastal regions with their easy access by sea. A tradition of Myanmar says that Tagaung was founded by Abhirāja, a prince of the Sakyans (the tribe of the Buddha), who had migrated to Upper Myanmar from Nepal in the ninth century BC. The city was subsequently conquered by the Chinese in approximately 600 BC, and Pagan and Prome were founded by refugees fleeing southward. In fact, some historians believe that, like the Myanmar,

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2. G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma* (London 1925; reprint 1967) pp. 5, 6.

the Sakyans were a Mongolian rather than an Indo-Aryan race, and that the Buddha's clansmen were derived from Mongolian stock.

First Contacts with the Buddha's Teachings

The source of information for many of the events related forthwith is the *Sāsanavaṃsa.*[3] The *Sāsanavaṃsa* is a chronicle written in Pāli by a bhikkhu,[4] Paññāsāmi, for the Fifth Buddhist Council held in Mandalay in 1867. As the *Sāsanavaṃsa* is a recent compilation, many events mentioned therein may be doubted. However, as it draws on both written records, some of which are no longer available, and on the oral tradition of Myanmar, information can be included in this account with the understanding that it is open to verification.

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3. Translated by B.C. Law, *The History of the Buddha's Religion* (London 1952), pp. 40 ff.

4. Bhikkhu is the term applied to a fully ordained member of the Buddha's Order.

There are many instances in the history of Southeast Asian tribes in which a conquering people incorporates into its own traditions not only the civilisation of the conquered, but also their clan gods, royal lineage, and thereby their history. This fact would explain the visits of the Buddha to Thaton and Shwesettaw in the Mon and Myanmar oral tradition, and the belief of the Arakanese that the Buddha visited their king and left behind an image of himself for them to worship. Modern historiography will, of course, dismiss these stories as fabrications made out of national pride, as the Myanmar had not even arrived in the region at the time of the Buddha. However, it is possible that the Myanmar and Arakanese integrated into their own lore the oral historical tradition of their Indian predecessors. This does not prove that the visits really took place, but it seems a more palatable explanation of the existence of these accounts than simply putting them down to historical afterthought of a Buddhist people eager to connect itself with the origins of their religion.

The *Sāsanavaṃsa* mentions several visits of the Buddha to Myanmar and one other important event:

the arrival of the hair relics in Ukkalā (Yangon) soon after the Buddha's enlightenment.

The Arrival of the Hair Relics

Tapussa and Bhallika, two merchants from Ukkalā,[5] were travelling through the region of Uruvela and were directed to the Buddha by their family god. The Buddha had just come out of seven weeks of meditation after his awakening and was sitting under a tree feeling the need for food. Tapussa and Bhallika made an offering of rice cake and honey to the Buddha and took the two refuges, the refuge in the Buddha and the refuge in the Dhamma (the Saṅgha, the third refuge, did not exist yet). As they were about to depart, they asked the Buddha for an object to worship in his stead and he gave them eight hairs from his head. After the two returned from their journey, they

5. Identified as Okkalapa near Yangon. Some believe it to be modern Orissa (Utkala) on the east coast of India.

enshrined the three hairs in a stupa which is now the great Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon.

It is believed in Myanmar that the hill upon which the Shwedagon Pagoda stands was not haphazardly chosen by Tapussa and Bhallika but was, in fact, the site where the three Buddhas preceding the Buddha Gotama in this world cycle themselves deposited relics. Buddha Kakusandha is said to have left his staff on the Theinguttara Hill, the Buddha Koṇāgamana his water filter, and Buddha Kassapa a part of his robe. Because of this, the Buddha requested Tapussa and Bhallika to enshrine his relics in this location. Tapussa and Bhallika travelled far and wide in order to find the hill on which they could balance a tree without its touching the ground either with the roots or with the crown. Eventually, they found the exact spot not far from their home in Lower Myanmar where they enshrined the holy relics in a traditional mound or stupa.[6] The original stupa is said to have been 27 feet high. Today the Shwedagon pagoda has grown to over 370 feet.

6. Shway Yoe, *The Burman* (reprint: Scotland 1989), pp. 179f.

The Buddha's Visits to the Region

The Myanmar oral tradition speaks of four visits of the Buddha to the region. While these visits were of utmost significance in their own right, they are also important in having established places of pilgrimage up to the present day.

The Visit to Central Myanmar

According to the *Sāsanavaṃsa*, the city of Aparanta is situated on the western shore of the Irrawaddy river at the latitude of Magwe. The *Sāsanavaṃsa* gives only a very brief summary of the events surrounding the Buddha's visit to Aparanta, presumably because these were well known and could be read in the Tipiṭaka and the commentaries.[7]

Puṇṇa, a merchant from Sunāparanta, went to Sāvatthi on business and there heard a discourse of the

7. Puṇṇovāda Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya I,267ff.; Theragātha, v. 70, Theragātha Aṭṭhakathā I,156ff.

Buddha.[8] Having won faith in the Buddha and the Teachings, he took ordination as a bhikkhu. After sometime, he asked the Buddha to teach him a short lesson so that he could return to Sunāparanta and strive for arahatship. The Buddha warned him that the people of Sunāparanta were fierce and violent, but Puṇṇa replied that he would not allow anger to arise, even if they should kill him. In the Puṇṇovāda Sutta, the Buddha instructed him not to be enticed by that which is pleasant, and Puṇṇa returned and attained arahatship in his country. He won over many disciples and built a monastery of red sandalwood for the Buddha (according to some chronicles of Myanmar, the Buddha made the prediction that at the location where the red sandalwood monastery was, the great king Alaungsithu of Pagan would build a shrine). He then sent flowers as an invitation to the Buddha and the Buddha came accompanied by five hundred arahats, spent the night in the monastery, and left again before dawn.[9]

8. See entry 'Puṇṇa' in G.P. Malalasekera, *A Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names* (PTS 1937-38).

9. The *Sāsanavaṃsa* says the Buddha stayed for seven weeks and converted eighty-four thousand beings to the Dhamma.

Sākka, the king of the thirty-three devas living in the Tavatiṃsa plane, provided five hundred palanquins for the bhikkhus accompanying the Buddha on the journey to Sunāparanta. But only 499 of the palanquins were occupied. One of them remained empty until the ascetic Saccabandha, who lived on the Saccabandha mountain in central Myanmar, joined the Buddha and the 499 bhikkhus accompanying him. On the way to Sunāparanta, the Buddha stopped in order to teach the ascetic Saccabandha. When Saccabanda attained arahatship, he then joined the Buddha and completed the total of 500 bhikkhus who usually travelled with the Master.

On the return journey, the Buddha stopped at the river Nammadā close to the Saccabandha mountain. Here, the Blessed One was invited by the Nāga king, Nammadā, to visit and preach to the Nāgas, later accepting food from them. The tradition of Myanmar relates that he left behind a footprint for veneration near this river, which would last as long as the Sāsana (i.e. 5,000 years). Another footprint was left in the rock

of the Saccabandha mountain.[10] These footprints, still visible today, were worshipped by the Mon, Pyu, and Myanmar kings alike and have remained among the holiest places of pilgrimage in Myanmar. In the fifteenth century, after the decimation of the population through the Siamese campaigns, knowledge of the footprints was lost. Then, in the year 1638, King Thalun sent learned bhikkhus to the region; fortuitously, they were able to relocate the Buddha's footprints. Since then Shwesettaw, the place where the footprints are found, has once again become an important place of pilgrimage in Myanmar. And in the dry season thousands of devout Buddhists travel there to pay respects.

The Visit to Arakan

In Dhaññavati, whose walls are still partially visible today, the Mahāmuni temple is located on the Sirigutta hill. In this temple, for over two millennia,

10. Ashin Dhammacāra, *Kyaungdawya zedidaw thamain* (Yangon 1978), pp. 28, 29.

the Mahāmuni image was enshrined and worshipped. The story of the Mahāmuni image, at one time one of the most revered shrines of Buddhism, is told in the *Sappadanapakaraṇa*, a work of a local historian.

Candrasuriya, the king of Dhaññavati, on hearing that a Buddha had arisen in India, desired to go there to learn the Dhamma. The Buddha, aware of his intention, said to Ānanda: "The king will have to pass through forests dangerous to travellers; wide rivers will impede his journey; he must cross a sea full of monsters. It will be an act of charity if we go to his dominion, so that he may pay homage without risking his life."

So the Buddha went there and was received with great pomp by King Candrasuriya and his people. The Buddha then taught the five and eight precepts and instructed the king in the ten kingly duties, namely, (1) universal beneficence, (2) daily paying homage, (3) the showing of mercy, (4) taxes of not more than a tenth part of the produce, (5) justice, (6) punishment without anger, (7) the support of his subjects as the

earth supports them, (8) the employment of prudent commanders, (9) the taking of good counsel, and (10) the avoidance of pride. The Buddha remained for a week and on preparing for his departure the king requested that he leave an image of himself, so that they could worship him even in his absence. The Buddha consented to this and Sākka the king of the gods himself formed the image with the metals collected by the king and his people. It was completed in one week and when the Buddha breathed onto it the people exclaimed that now there were indeed two Buddhas, so alike was the image to the great sage. Then the Buddha made a prophesy addressing the image: "I shall pass into Nibbāna in my eightieth year, but you will live for five thousand years which I have foreseen as the duration of my Teaching."

The Mahāmuni image remained in its original location until 1784 when King Bodawpaya conquered Arakan and had the image transported to Mandalay where a special shrine, the Arakan pagoda, was built to enshrine the three-meter image. To have this image in his capital greatly added to his prestige as a Buddhist

king, as it was one of the most sacred objects in the region. The king himself went out of his city to meet the approaching image with great devotion and "through the long colonnades leading to the pagoda, there used to come daily from the Myanmar palace, so long as a king reigned there, sumptuous offerings borne in stately procession, marshalled by a minister and shaded by the white umbrella."[11]

The Missionaries of the Third Buddhist Council

The Third Buddhist Council was held in the reign of Emperor Asoka in the year 232 BC in order to purify the Saṅgha, to reassert orthodox teaching and to refute heresy. But the work of the Council did not stop there. With the support of Emperor Asoka, experienced teachers were sent to border regions in order to spread the teachings of the Buddha. This dispersal of missionaries is recorded in the *Mahāvaṃsa*, a Sinhalese chronicle on the history of Buddhism:

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11. Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 268.

> When the thera Moggaliputta, the illuminator of the religion of the Conqueror, had brought the (third) council to an end and when, looking into the future, he had beheld the founding of the religion in adjacent countries, then in the month of Katthika he sent forth theras, one here and one there. The thera Majjhantika he sent to Kasmīra and Gandhāra, the thera Mahādeva he sent to Mahisamaṇḍala. To Vanavāsa he sent the thera named Rakkhita, and to Aparantaka the Yona named Dhammarakkhita; to Mahārattha he sent the thera named Mahādhammarakkhita, but the thera Mahārakkhita he sent into the country of the Yona. He sent the thera Majjhima to the Himālaya country and together with the thera Uttara, the thera Soṇa of wondrous might went to Suvaṇṇabhūmi….[12]

According to the *Sāsanavaṃsa*, the above mentioned regions are the following: Kasmīra and Gandhāra is the right bank of the Indus river south of Kabul; Mahisamaṇḍala is Andhra; Vanavāsa is the region around Prome; Aparantaka is west of the upper Irrawaddy; Mahārattha is Thailand; Yona, the country

12. *The Mahāvaṃsa* (reprint: London: PTS, 1980), p. 82.

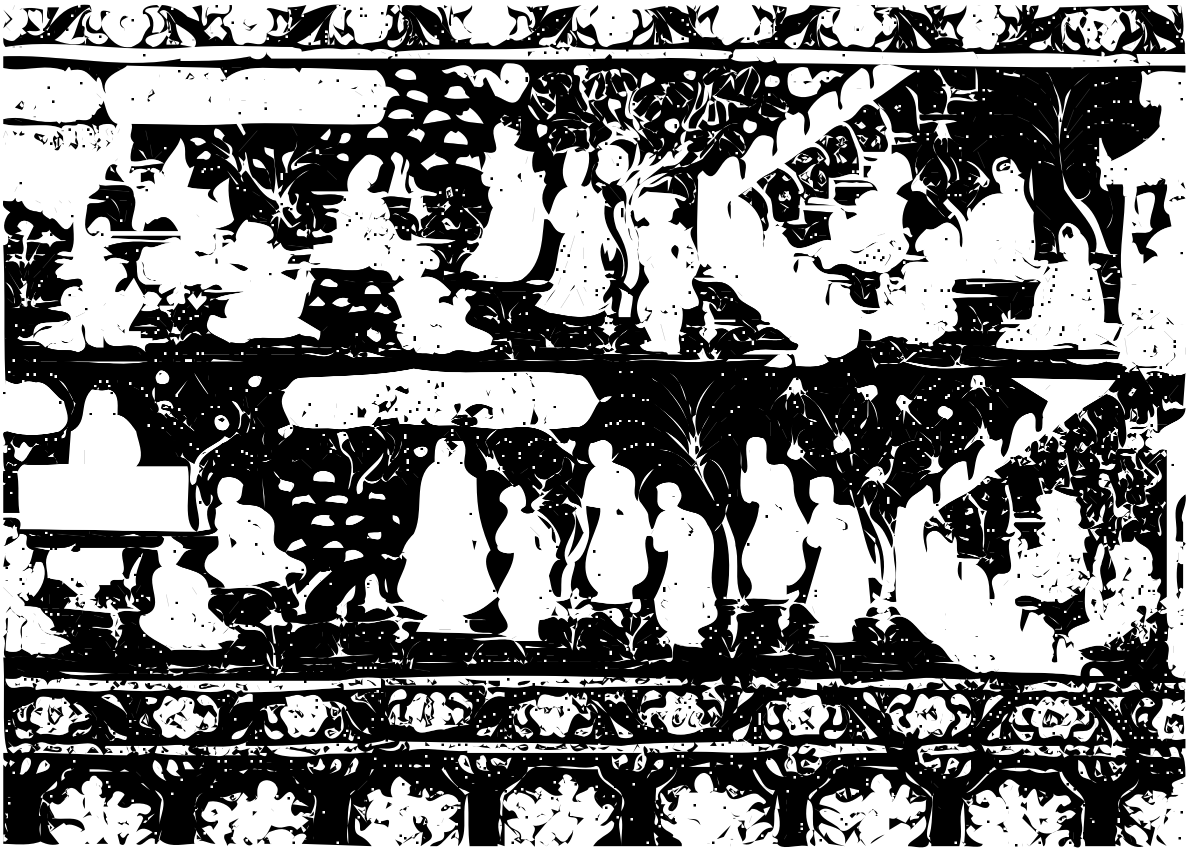
of the Shan tribes; and Suvaṇṇabhūmi is Thaton. The *Sāsanavaṃsa* mentions five places in Southeast Asia where Asoka's missionaries taught the Buddha's doctrine, and through their teaching many gained insight and took refuge in the Triple Gem. There are two interesting features mentioned in the text. First, in order to ordain nuns, bhikkhunīs, other bhikkhunīs had to be present, and secondly, the Brahmajāla Sutta was preached in Thaton.

The *Sāsanavaṃsa* goes on to describe sixty thousand women ordaining in Aparanta. It states that women could not have been ordained without the presence of bhikkhunīs, as in Sri Lanka where women could only be ordained after Mahinda's sister Saṅghamittā had followed her brother there. In this case, the author surmises that bhikkhunīs must have followed Dhammarakkhita to Aparanta at a later stage.

The Brahmajāla Sutta, which the arahats Soṇa and Uttara preached in Thaton, deals in detail with the different schools of philosophical and religious thought prevalent in India at the time of the Buddha.

The fact that Soṇa and Uttara chose this Sutta to convert the inhabitants of Suvaṇṇabhūmi indicates that they were facing a well-informed public, familiar with the views of Brahmanism that were refuted by the Buddha in this discourse. There can be no doubt that only Indian colonisers, not the Mon, would have been able to follow an analysis of Indian philosophy as profound as the Brahmajāla Sutta.

Jātaka scene painting from Amarapura, Burma (1911).
Australian National Gallery, Canberra.



Chapter 2
Buddhism in the Mon and Pyu Kingdoms

While there is no conclusive archaeological proof that Buddhism continued to be practised in southern Myanmar after the missions of the Third Council, the *Sāsanavaṃsa* refers to an unbroken lineage of teachers passing on the Dhamma to their disciples.

The Mon

In a third century AD inscription by a South Indian king in Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, the land of the Cilatas is mentioned in a list of countries visited by a group of bhikkhus. Historians believe the Cilatas or Kiratas (also mentioned by Ptolemy and in Sanskrit literature) to be identical to the Mon populations of Lower Myanmar.

The inscription states that the bhikkhus sent to the Cilata country converted the population there to

Buddhism. In the same inscription, missions to other countries such as Sri Lanka are mentioned. It is generally believed that most of these countries had received earlier Buddhist missionaries sent by Buddhist kings, but as civilisation in these lands was relatively undeveloped, teachings as profound as the Buddha's had probably become distorted by local religions or possibly been completely lost. It is possible that these missions did not so much re-establish Buddhism, but rather purify the type of Buddhism practised there. Southern India was then the guardian of the Theravāda faith and obviously remained in contact with countries that had been converted in earlier times but were unable to preserve the purity of the religion.

As has been already mentioned, the first datable archaeological finds of the Mon civilisation stem from the Mon kingdom of Dvāravatī in the South of Thailand. They consist of a Roman oil lamp and a bronze statue of the Buddha which are believed to be no later than the first or second century AD. In discussing the Mon Theravāda Buddhist civilisation,

we cannot remain in Myanmar only. For only by studying the entire sphere of influence of the Mon in this period, can a comprehensive picture be constructed. This sphere includes large parts of present day Thailand. In fact, the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, Yuan Chwang, who travelled to India in about 630 AD, describes a single Mon country stretching from Prome to Chenla in the east and including the Irrawaddy and Sittang deltas. He calls the country Dvāravatī, but the annals of the court of China of the same period mention Dvāravatī as a vassal of Thaton. We can, therefore, safely conclude that the Mon of the region formed a fairly homogenous group in which the distribution of power was obviously not always evident to the outsider.

The Pyu

Lower Myanmar was also inhabited by another ethnic group, the Pyu, who were probably closely related to the modern Myanmar. They had their capital at Sri Ksetra (near modern day Prome) and were also follow-

ers of the Theravāda Buddhist faith. Chinese travellers' reports of the mid-third century AD refer to the kingdom of Lin-Yang where Buddha was venerated by all and where several thousand monks or bhikkhus lived. As Lin-Yang was to the west of Kamboja[13] and could not be reached by sea, we can infer that the Chinese travellers must have been referring to the ancient kingdom of Prome. This is all the more likely as archaeological finds prove that only about one century later Pāli Buddhist texts, including Abhidhamma texts, were studied by the Pyu.

The earliest highly developed urban settlement of the Pyu was Beikthano, near Prome. However, its importance dwindled towards the sixth century, when Sri Ksetra became the centre of Pyu civilisation. A major monastery built in the fourth century has been unearthed at Beikthano. The building, constructed in brick, with a stupa and shrine located nearby, is identical to the Buddhist monasteries of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa,

13. Kamboja, a country referred to by Emperor Asoka in his inscriptions, is generally believed to be to the west of India. It could, however, also be identical with the Cambodia of today, and it is conceivable that two Kambojas existed.

the great Buddhist centre of southern India. It is situated near a stupa and a shrine, a design which is identical to the one used in South India. Bricks had been used by the Pyus since the second century AD for the construction of pillared halls, which formed the temples of their original religion. Interestingly, the Pyu bricks have always been of the exact dimensions as those used at the time of Emperor Asoka in India. But the brick laying techniques used in the monastery in Beikthano were far inferior to the ones used in their southern Indian counterparts.

For such a major edifice as the monastery at Beikthano to have been constructed, the religion must have been well established at least among the ruling class. How long it took for Buddhism to become influential in Pyu society is difficult to determine, but some historians assume that the first contacts with Asokan religious centres in India took place in the second century AD. This would allow for a period of development of two hundred years until the first important shrine was built. Despite the Indian architectural influence, the inferior brick laying techniques found in Beikthano

indicate that indigenous architects and artisans, rather than imported craftsmen or Indian colonisers, were employed in the construction of monasteries and other important buildings.

It should, of course, not be forgotten that the Pyu possessed an architecture of their own and a highly developed urban culture that had evolved quite independently of Indian influences. Theravāda Buddhism found a fertile ground in this highly developed civilisation. It is probable that the Pyu civilisation was more advanced than that of the Mon. The Pyu sites found around Prome are the earliest urban sites in Southeast Asia found to date. The urban developments and datable monuments in Thailand and Cambodia are only from the seventh century. Older artifacts may have been found in Thailand, but they were not products of indigenous people and do not prove the existence of a developed civilisation.

The information we have of the state of the religion in the Mon and Pyu societies during the first four centuries AD is very limited. However, by the fifth

century, with the development of religious activity in the region, information becomes more substantive. The historical tradition of Myanmar gives the credit for this religious resurgence to a well-known Buddhist scholar, Ācariya Buddhaghosa.

Buddhaghosa and Myanmar

Ācariya Buddhaghosa was the greatest commentator on the Pāli Buddhist texts, whose *Visuddhimagga* and commentaries to the canon are regarded as authoritative by Theravāda scholars. The chronicles of Myanmar firmly maintain that Buddhaghosa was of Mon origin and a native of Thaton. They state that his return from Sri Lanka, with the Pāli scriptures, the commentaries, and grammatical works, gave a fresh impetus to the religion.

However, modern historians do not accept that Buddhaghosa was from Myanmar while some even

doubt his existence.[14] Despite this contention, Eliot, in his *Hinduism and Buddhism*, gives more weight to circumstantial evidence and writes:

> The Burmese tradition that Buddhaghosa was a native of Thaton and returned thither from Sri Lanka merits more attention than it has received. It can easily be explained away as patriotic fancy. On the other hand, if Buddhaghosa's object was to invigorate Hinayanism in India the result of his really stupendous labours was singularly small, for in India his name is connected with no religious movement. But if we suppose that he went to Sri Lanka by way of the holy places in Magadha [now Bihar] and returned from the Coromandal coast [Madras] to Burma where Hinayanism afterwards flourished, we have at least a coherent narrative.[15]

The Sinhalese chronicles, especially the *Mahāvaṃsa*, place Buddhaghosa in the first half of the fifth century. Although he spent most of his active working life in Sri

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14. Smith, Asoka's alleged mission to Pegu (*Indian Antiquary*, xxxiv, 1905), pp. 185–86.

15. Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, I, p. 32.

Lanka, he is also credited with imbuing new life into Theravāda Buddhism in South India, and developing such important centres as Kañcipura and Uragapuram that were closely connected with Prome and Thaton. Proof of this connection can be found in archeological finds in the environs of Prome which include Pāli literature inscribed in the Kadambe script on gold and stone plates. This script was used in the fifth and sixth century in southern India.

All in all, Myanmar has a valid case for claiming some connection with Buddhaghosa. It is, of course, impossible to prove that he was born there or even visited there, but his influence undoubtedly led to great religious activity in the kingdoms of Lower Myanmar.

Buddhism in Lower Myanmar: 5th to 11th Centuries

From the fifth century until the conquest of Lower Myanmar by Pagan, there is a continuous record of Buddhism flourishing in the Mon and Pyu kingdoms.

The Mon kingdoms are mentioned in travel reports of several Chinese Buddhist pilgrims and also in the annals of the Chinese court. In the fifth century, Thaton and Pegu (Pago) are mentioned in the Buddhist commentarial literature for the first time.[16] They were now firmly established on the map as Buddhist centres of learning. Despite this, Buddhism was not without rivals in the region. This is shown, by the following event some chronicles of Myanmar mention.

A king of Pago, Tissa by name, had abandoned the worship of the Buddha and instead practised Brahmanical worship. He persecuted the Buddhists and destroyed Buddha images or cast them into ditches. A pious Buddhist girl, the daughter of a merchant, restored the images, then washed and worshipped them. The king could not tolerate such defiance, of course, and had the girl dragged before him. He tried to have her executed in several ways, but she seemed impossible to kill. Elephants would not

16. Mentioned in several places in the *Manorathapūraṇī*, the commentary to the Aṅguttara Nikāya.

trample her,while the fire of her pyre would not burn her. Eventually the king, intrigued by these events, asked the girl to perform a miracle. He stated that, if she was able to make a Buddha image produce seven new images and then make all eight statues fly into heaven, she would be set free. The girl spoke an act of truth, and the eight Buddha statues flew up into the sky. The king was then converted to Buddhism and elevated the girl to the position of chief queen.

Until now, archaeological finds of Mon ruins in Myanmar are meagre, but at P’ong Tuk, in southern Thailand,[17] a Mon city, dating from the second half of the first millennium AD, has been unearthed. Here, excavations have revealed the foundations of several buildings. One contained the remains of a platform and fragments of columns similar to the Buddhist vihāra at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka; another, with a square foundation of round stones, seems to have been a stupa. Statues of Indian origin from the Gupta period (320–600 AD) were also found at the site. The Ther-

17. Cf. L.P. Briggs, Dvāravatī, the most ancient kingdom of Siam (JAOS, 65, 1945), p. 98.

avāda Buddhist culture of the Mon flourished in both Dvāravatī and Thaton. However, the Mon civilisation in Thailand did not survive the onslaught of the Khmer in the eleventh century who were worshipping Hindu gods. In Myanmar, the Mon kingdom was conquered by Pagan. The Myanmar were eager to accept the Mon culture and especially their religion, while the Khmer, as Hindus, at best tolerated it.

The Pyu culture of this period is well documented because of archaeological finds at Muanggan, a small village close to the ancient ruins of Hmawza. There two perfectly preserved inscribed gold plates were found. These inscriptions reveal three texts: the verses spoken by Assaji to Sāriputta (*ye dhammā hetuppa-bhava…*), a list of categories of the Abhidhamma (*cattāro iddhipāda*, *cattāro samappadhāna…*), and the formula of worship of Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha (*iti pi so bhagava…*). At the same site, a book with twenty leaves of gold protected with golden covers, was discovered. It contained texts such as the *paṭicca-samuppāda* (dependent origination), the *vipassanā-ñāṇas* (stages of insight knowledge), and various other

excerpts from the Abhidhamma and the other two baskets of the Buddhist scriptures. The scripts in all these documents are identical to scripts used in parts of southern India, and can be dated from the third to the sixth century AD.

In addition to these golden plates, a number of sculptures and reliefs were found in Hmawza. They depict either the Buddha or scenes from his life, for example, the birth of the Buddha and the taming of the wild elephant Nālagiri. The sculpture is similar in style to that of Amarāvatī, a centre of Buddhist learning in South India. There were also unearthed remains of Brahman temples and sites of Mahāyāna worship of east Indian origin; hence it would appear that several faiths, of which the Theravāda was the strongest, co-existed in Sri Ksetra, the then capital of the Pyu. The script used by the Pyu is indicative of major links with Buddhist kingdoms in South India rather than with Sri Lanka. And it can be surmised that the bhikkhus of the Deccan and other regions of southern India were the teachers of both the Mon and the Pyu in religious matters as well as in the arts and sciences.

The inscriptions show how highly developed scholarship of the Pāli Buddhist texts must have been in Lower Myanmar even in these early days. Learning had gone well beyond the basics into the world of Abhidhamma studies. Pāli was obviously well known as a language of learning, but unfortunately no original texts composed in Sri Ksetra or Thaton have come down to us. Interestingly, some of the texts inscribed on these gold plates are not identical to the same canonical texts as they are known today. Therefore, the Tipiṭaka known to the Pyu must have been replaced by a version preserved in a country that had no close contact with the Pyu. This could well have been Sri Lanka, as this country came to play an important role in the history of Buddhism in Myanmar through the friendship between the conqueror of Lower Myanmar, Anawratha, and the king who drove the Hindus from Sri Lanka, Vijayabāhu.

The finds on the site of the ancient Pyu capital confirm the reports of the Chinese pilgrims and also the Tang imperial chronicles of China which state: “They (the Pyu) dislike taking life. They know how to make

astronomical calculations. They are Buddhists and have a hundred monasteries, with brick of glass embellished with gold and silver vermilion, gay colours and red kino…. At seven years of age the people cut their hair and enter a monastery; if at the age of twenty they have not grasped the doctrine they return to the lay state."[18]

Both Buddhist cultures in the south of Myanmar, the Mon and the Pyu, were swept away in the eleventh century by armies of the Myanmar who had found a unifying force in their leader, the founder of Pagan and champion of Buddhism, Anawratha.

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18. Parker, *Burma with special reference to the relations with China* (Rangoon 1893), p. 12.

Chapter 3
Theravāda Buddhism Comes to Pagan

The Beginnings of Pagan

Pagan is believed to have been founded in the years 849–850 AD, by the Myanmar, who had already established themselves as rice growers in the region around Kyauksai near Mandalay. Anawratha began to unite the region by subjugating one chieftain after another and was successful in giving the Myanmar a sense of belonging to a larger community, a nation. The crucial event in the history of Myanmar is not so much the founding of the city of Pagan and the building of its walls and moat, but more Pagan's acceptance of Theravāda Buddhism in the eleventh century. The religion was brought to the Myanmar by a Mon bhikkhu named Shin Arahan.

The religion prevailing among the Myanmar before and during the early reign of Anawratha was some form of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which had probably

found its way into the region from the Pāla kingdom in Bengal. This is apparent from bronze statues depicting Bodhisattas and especially the “Lokanātha,” a Bodhisatta believed, in Bengal, to reign in the period between the demise of the Buddha Gotama and the advent of the Buddha Metteyya. Anawratha continued to cast terracotta votive tablets with the image of Lokanātha even after he embraced the Theravāda doctrine.[19]

In India, Buddhism had split into numerous schools, some of which differed fundamentally from the teachings of Pāli Buddhism, which is also called Theravāda Buddhism (the doctrine of the Theras). The Ari, the monks or priests of this Mahāyāna Buddhist form of worship, are described, in later chronicles of Myanmar, as the most shameless bogus ascetics imaginable. They are said to have sold absolution from sin and to have oppressed the people in various ways with their tyranny. Their tantric Buddhism included, as an important element, the worship of Nāgas

19. For a detailed treatment of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Pagan, see G.H. Luce, *Old Burma Early Pagan* (New York, 1969), I, p. 184ff.

(dragons), which was probably an ancient indigenous tradition.

At this time, the beginning of the eleventh century, the Buddhist religion among the Mon in Suvaṇṇabhūmi was on the decline as people were disturbed by robbers and raiders, by plagues, and by adversaries of the religion. These most probably came from the Hindu Khmer kingdom in Cambodia and the north of Thailand. The Khmer were endeavouring to add Thaton and the other Mon kingdoms of the south to their expanding empire. Shin Arahan must have feared that bhikkhus would not be able to continue to maintain their religious practice and the study of the scriptures under these circumstances. He went, therefore, upcountry where a new, strong people were developing, prosperous and secure from enemies.

It is interesting to note that in this same period, Buddhism was under attack in other places as well. The Colas, a Hindu dynasty strongly opposed to Buddhism, arose in southern India, one of the last strongholds of Theravāda Buddhism. They were able

to expand their rule to include most of Sri Lanka between 1017 and 1070. The great Mon city, Dvāravatī, a Theravāda centre in southern Thailand, fell to the Khmer, the masters of the whole of Thailand, who were Shaivaite Hindus. In the north of India, Muslim armies were trying to destroy what little was left of Buddhism there. "In this perilous period," writes Professor Luce, "Buddhism was saved only by such valiant fighters as Vijayabāhu in Sri Lanka and Anawratha."[20]

Shin Arahan Converts the King

Shin Arahan arrived in the vicinity of Pagan and was discovered in his forest dwelling by a hunter. The hunter, who had never before seen such a strange creature with a shaven head and a yellow robe, thought he was some kind of spirit and took him to the king, Anawratha. Shin Arahan naturally sat down on the throne, as it was the highest seat, and the king thought: "This man is peaceful, in this man there is the

20. Ibid, I, p. 14.

essential thing. He is sitting down on the best seat, surely he must be the best being.” The king asked the visitor to tell him where he came from and was told that he came from the place where the Order lived and that the Buddha was his teacher. Then Shin Arahan gave the king the teaching on mindfulness (*appamāda*), teaching him the same doctrine Nigrodha had given Emperor Asoka when he was converted. Shin Arahan then told the monarch that the Buddha had passed into Parinibbāna, but that his teaching, the Dhamma, enshrined in the Tipiṭaka, and the twofold Saṅgha consisting of those who possessed absolute knowledge and those who possessed conventional knowledge, remained.

The king must have felt that he had found what had been missing in his life and a genuine alternative to the superficial teachings of the Ari monks. He built a monastery for Shin Arahan, and according to some sources, stopped all worship of the Ari monks. Tradition has it that he had them dressed in white and even forced them to serve as soldiers in his army. The Ari tradition continued for a long time, however, and

its condemnation is a feature of much later times, and not, as far as contemporary evidence shows, of the Pagan era.

The *Sāsanavaṃsa* gives an alternate version of Anawratha's conversion according to which Shin Arahan had originally come from Sri Lanka to study the Dhamma in Dvāravatī and Thaton and was on his way to Sri Ksetra in search of a text when he was taken to Anawratha by a hunter. The king asked him, "Who are you?" — "O King, I am a disciple of Gotama." — "Of what kind are the Three Jewels?" — "O King, the Buddha should be regarded as Mahosadha the wise, his doctrine as Ummagga, his order as the Videhan army."[21]

This version is interesting in that Anawratha is portrayed as being a Buddhist with knowledge of Jātaka stories, such as the Mahosadha Jātaka referred to above, even before meeting Shin Arahan. This assumption that he was no stranger to Buddhism is

21. Cf. Mahā-ummagga-jātaka, No.546, *The Jātakas* (reprint: PTS, 1973), p. 156.

supported by the fact that earlier kings had been followers of Buddhism in varying degrees. Caw Rahan, who died about 94 years before Anawratha's accession, is said to have built a Sīma and five Pagodas, and Kyaung Pyu Min built the white monastery outside Pagan. Kyaung Pyu Min is believed to have been Anawratha's father.

Anawratha Acquires the Scriptures

Through Shin Arahan, Anawratha had now found the religion he had been yearning for and he decided to set out and procure the scriptures and holy relics of this religion. For he wished his kingdom to be secured on the original teachings of the Buddha. He tried to find the scriptures and relics of his new religion in different quarters. In his enthusiasm he did not limit his quest to Thaton, but also searched among the Khmer in Angkor, and in Tali, the capital of the Nanchāo, a kingdom in modern day Yunnan, in China, where a tooth of the Buddha was enshrined. But everywhere he was refused. He then went to Thaton,

where his teacher Shin Arahan had come from, to request a copy of the scriptures. According to the tradition of Myanmar, Anawratha's request was refused, and unable to endure another refusal he set out with his army in the year 1057 to conquer Thaton and acquire the Tipiṭaka by force. Before conquering Thaton, however, he had to subjugate Sri Ksetra, the Pyu capital. From there, he took the relics enshrined in King Dwattabaung's Bawbaw-gyi Pagoda to Pagan.

Some think that the aim of his campaign was mainly to add the prosperous Indian colonies of Lower Myanmar to his possessions, while others think he may have actually been called to Thaton to defend it against the marauding Khmer. Whatever the immediate cause of his campaign in the lower country, we know for certain that he returned with the king of Thaton and his court, with Mon artists and scholars and, above all, with Thaton's bhikkhus and their holy books, the Tipiṭaka. Suvaṇṇabhūmi and its Mon population were now in the hands of the Myanmar and the Mon culture and religion were accepted and assimilated in the emergent Pagan with fervour.

Initially the fervour must have been restricted to the king and possibly his immediate entourage, yet even they continued to propitiate their traditional gods for worldly gain as the new religion was considered a higher practice. Theravāda Buddhism does not provide much in the way of rites and rituals, but a royal court cannot do without them. So the traditional propitiation of the Nāgas continued to be used for court ceremonials and remained part of the popular religion, while the bhikkhus were accorded the greatest respect and their master, the Buddha Gotama, was honoured with the erection of pagodas and shrines.

There were contacts between the new kings of Myanmar and Sri Lanka that are recorded not only in the chronicles of the two countries but also in stone inscriptions in South India.[22] As the Hindu Colas had ruled Sri Lanka for more than half a century, Buddhism had been weakened and King Vijayabāhu, who had driven out the Vaishnavite Colas, wanted to

22. Cf. Wickremasinghe, *Epigraphica Zeylan.*, I, pp. 242—55.

re-establish his religion. So in 1070, he requested King Anawratha of Myanmar, who had assisted him financially in his war against the Colas, to send bhikkhus to re-introduce the pure ordination into his country.[23] It is interesting to note that the *Cūḷavaṃsa* refers to Anawratha as the king of Ramañña, which was Lower Myanmar, also called Suvaṇṇabhūmi. He was approached as the conqueror and master of Thaton, a respected Theravāda centre, rather than as the king of Pagan, a new and unknown country. The bhikkhus who travelled to Sri Lanka brought the Sinhalese Tipiṭaka back with them and established a link between the two countries which was to last for centuries.

Anawratha is mentioned in the Myanmar, Mon, Khmer, Thai, and Sinhalese chronicles as a great champion of Buddhism because he developed Pagan into a major regional power and laid the foundation for its glory. He did not, however, build many of the temples for which Pagan is now so famous as the great

23. *Cūlavaṃsa*, ch.60, vv. 4–8.

age of temple building started only after his reign. It is important to realize that his interest was not restricted only to Pagan. He built pagodas wherever his campaigns took him and adorned them with illustrations from the Jātakas and the life of the Buddha. Some maintain that he used only Jātakas as themes for the adornment of his religious buildings because that was all he possessed of the Tipiṭaka. Such a conclusion is negative and quite superficial. After all, during Asoka's time Jātakas and scenes from the life of the Buddha were used for illustrations in Bharut and Sanchi, the great stupas near Bombay. We cannot therefore deduce that the builders of Bharut and Sanchi were acquainted only with the Jātakas. These edifying stories which teach the fundamentals of Buddhism so skilfully are singularly suited to educate an illiterate people beset by superstitions through the vivid visual means of the stone reliefs depicting these stories. It is almost unthinkable that the Mon Saṅgha, who taught Anawratha, had no knowledge of at least all of the Vinaya. Otherwise, they would not have been able to re-establish a valid ordination of bhikkhus in Sri Lanka.

Anawratha left behind innumerable clay tablets adorned with images of the Buddha, the king’s name, and some Pāli and Sanskrit verses. A typical aspiration on these tablets was: “By me, King Anawratha, this mould of Sugata (Buddha) has been made. Through this may I obtain the path to Nibbāna when Metteyya is awakened.” Anawratha aspired to become a disciple of the Buddha Metteyya, unlike many later kings of Myanmar who aspired to Buddhahood. Is this an indication that this warrior had remained a modest man in spite of his empire building?

Chapter 4
Pagan: Flowering and Decline

Anawratha was succeeded by a number of kings of varying significance to Buddhism in Myanmar. His successors inherited a relatively stable and prosperous kingdom and consequently were able to embark on the huge temple building projects for which their reigns are still remembered.

This is the time when kings such as Kyanzitta and others built pagodas, libraries, monasteries, and ordination halls. These kings must have possessed coffers full of riches collected from their extensive kingdom which they lavished on the religion of the Buddha. Their palaces were probably built of wood as was the last palace of the Myanmar dynasty. Though the palaces must have reflected the wealth and power of the rulers, the more durable brick was not deemed necessary for such worldly buildings. This is similar to views still found in rural areas of Myanmar today. The only structure adorned to any extent in a village is the

monastery and the buildings attached to it, such as the rest house. The villagers are very modest with regard to their private houses and even consider it improper to decorate them. Their monastery, however, is given every decoration affordable.

Kyanzitta Strengthens Theravāda Buddhism

Kyanzitta (1084–1113), who had been Anawratha's commander-in-chief and had succeeded Anawratha's son to the throne, consolidated Theravāda Buddhism's predominance in Pagan. In his reign, such important shrines as the Shwezigon Pagoda, the Nanda, Nagayon, and Myinkaba Kubyauk-gyi temples were built.

With the three latter temples, Kyanzitta introduced a new style of religious building. The traditional stupa or dagoba found in India and Sri Lanka is a solid mound in which relics or other holy objects are enshrined. The area of worship is situated around them and is usually marked by ornate stone railings. In the new style of

building, however, the solid mound had been hollowed out and could be entered. The central shrine was surrounded by halls which housed stone reliefs depicting scenes from the Buddha's life and Jātaka stories. Kyanzitta's aim was the conversion of his people to the new faith. Whereas Anawratha had been busy expanding his empire and bringing relics and the holy scriptures to Pagan, Kyanzitta's mission was to consolidate this enterprise. Enormous religious structures such as the Nanda Temple attracted the populace and the interiors of the temples allowed the bhikkhus to instruct the inquisitive in the king's faith.

Professor Luce writes:

> The Nanda (temple)… he built with four broad halls. Each hall had the same 16 scenes in stone relief all identically arranged. The bhikkhus could cope with four audiences simultaneously. The scenes cover the whole life of the Buddha. When well grounded in these, the audience would pass to the outer wall of the corridor. Here, running around the whole corridor are the 80 scenes of Gotama's life up to the Enlightenment. The later life of the

> Buddha is shown in hundreds of other stone reliefs on the inner walls and shrines.[24]

Kyanzitta’s efforts for the advancement of Buddhism were not limited to his own country. For in one of his many inscriptions, he also mentions that he sent craftsmen to Bodhgaya to repair the Mahābodhi temple, which had been destroyed by a foreign king. The upkeep of the Mahābodhi temple became a tradition with the kings of Myanmar, who continued to send missions to Bodhgaya to repair the temple and also to donate temple slaves and land to the holiest shrine of Buddhism.[25]

Kyanzitta also initiated an extensive review and purification of the Tipiṭaka by the bhikkhus. This was the first occasion in Myanmar’s history when the task of a Buddhist Saṅgāyana or Synod, comparing the Sinhalese and Suvaṇṇabhūmi’s Tipiṭaka, was undertaken. It is possible and even probable that this huge

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24. Luce, *Old Burma Early Pagan*, I, p. 79.

25. Cf. D.K. Barua, *Buddha Gaya Temple, Its History* (Buddha Gaya, 1981), pp. 59, 62, 63, 163, 176, 195, 244–247.

editing work was carried out along with visiting Sinhalese bhikkhus.

By nature of Myanmar's geographical position, external influences swept in predominantly from northern India, and therefore tantric Buddhism, dominant especially in Bengal, remained strong. However, Kyanzitta succeeded in firmly establishing the Pāli Tipiṭaka by asking the bhikkhus to compare the ancient Mon Tipiṭaka with the texts obtained from the Mahāvihāra in Sri Lanka. In this way, he also made it clear that confirmation of orthodoxy was to be sought in Sri Lanka and not in any other Buddhist country. Though Mahāyāna practices were tolerated in his reign (his chief queen was a tantric Buddhist), they were not officially regarded as the pure religion. It is characteristic of Pagan that these two branches of Buddhism co-existed — the religion of the Theras, which was accepted as the highest religion — and the tantric practices, which included the worship of spirits or *nats* and gave more immediate satisfaction. Pagodas are often adorned with figures of all types of deities, but the deities are normally shown in an attitude of

reverence towards the pagoda, a symbol of the Buddha. The ancient gods were not banished, but had to submit to the peerless Buddha. Tradition attributes to King Anawratha the observation: "Men will not come for the sake of the new faith. Let them come for their old gods, and gradually they will be won over."

An approach such as this, whether it was Anawratha's or Kyanzitta's, would suggest that the practice of the old religion of the Ari monks was allowed to continue and that the conversion of the country was gentle and peaceful as befits the religion of the Buddha. Although later Myanmar chronicles refer to the Ari monks as a debased group of charlatans who were totally rooted out by Anawratha, this is far from the truth. A powerful movement of "priests" who incorporated magic practices in their teachings continued to exist throughout the Pagan period, and though they may have respected the basic rules of the Vinaya and donned the yellow robe, their support was rooted in the old animistic beliefs of the Myanmar.[26] It should

26. Cf. Than Tun, *Essays on the History and Buddhism of Burma* (Arran, 1988), pp. 85ff.

not be forgotten that the Myanmar first started to settle in the area of Kyauksai in the sixth century AD and that the “man in the field” was in no way ready for such highly developed a religion as Theravāda Buddhism. The transition had to be gradual, and the process that started remains still incomplete in the minds of many people, especially in the more remote areas of the hill country.

The example of Kyanzitta’s son Rājakumār, however, shows how even in those early days the teachings of the Buddha were understood and practised not only by the bhikkhus, but also by lay people and members of the royal court. Rājakumār’s conduct is proof of his father’s ability to establish men in the Dhamma and survives as a monument just as the Ānanda temple does.

Rājakumār was Kyanzitta’s only son and his rightful heir. Due to political misadventures Kyanzitta was separated from his wife and therefore not aware of the birth of his son for seven years. When his daughter gave birth to his grandson he anointed him as future king immediately after his birth. Rājakumār grew up in

the shadow of his nephew, the crown prince, but neither during his father's reign nor after his death did he ever try to usurp the throne through intrigue or by force. He was a minister zealous in the affairs of state, prudent and wise. He was also a scholar of the Tipiṭaka and instrumental in its review, vigorously supporting his father in his objective to establish Buddhism. But he is best known for his devotion to his father in his last years when his health was failing. In order to restore the king's health he built five pagodas which to this day are called Min-o-Chanda, "The Welfare of the Old King." When the king was on his deathbed:

> Rājakumār, remembering the many and great favours with which the king had nourished him, made a beautiful golden image of the Buddha and entering with ceremony presented it to the king, saying: "This golden Buddha I have made to help my lord. The three villages of slaves you gave me, I give to this Buddha." And the king rejoiced and said "Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu." Then in the presence of the compassionate Mahāthera and other leading bhikkhus, the king poured on the ground the water

of dedication, calling the earth to witness. Then Rājakumār enshrined the golden image, and built around it a cave temple with a golden pinnacle.[27]

LATER KINGS

Rājakumār's nephew was King Alaungsithu (c.1113–67), who continued the tradition of his dynasty of glorifying the Buddha's religion by building a vast temple, the Sabbaññu Temple, probably the largest monument in Pagan. During his many travels and campaigns, he built pagodas and temples throughout Myanmar. The faith that Shin Arahan had inspired in Anawratha and his successors continued to inspire Alaungsithu. Shin Arahan, who had seen kings come and go and the flowering of the religion he brought to Pagan, is believed to have died during the reign of King Alaungsithu, in about 1115.

After the death of Alaungsithu, Pagan was thrown into turmoil by violent struggles for the throne. Several

27. Cf. Luce, *Old Burma Early Pagan*, I, p. 74.

kings reigned for short periods and spent most of their time and resources in power struggles. One even succeeded in alienating the great king of Sri Lanka, Parākramabāhu, by mistreating his emissaries and breaking the agreements between the two countries. Eventually Parākramabāhu invaded Myanmar, devastating towns and villages and killing the king. The new king, Narapati (1174–1210), blessed the country with a period of peace and prosperity. This conducive atmosphere was to allow outstanding scholarship and learning to arise in Pagan.

Kyawswa (1234–50) was a king under whom scholarship was encouraged even more, undoubtedly because the king himself spent most of his time in scholarly pursuits including memorising passages of the Tipiṭaka. He had relinquished most of his worldly duties to his son in order to dedicate more time to the study of the scriptures. Two grammatical works, the *Saddabindu* and the *Paramatthabindu*, are ascribed to him. It would appear that his palace was a place of great culture and learning as his ministers and his daughter are credited with scholarly works as well.

During the twelfth century, a sect of forest dwellers also thrived. They were called *araññaka* in Pāli and were identical with the previously mentioned Ari of the later chroniclers of Myanmar.[28] This was a monastic movement that only used the yellow robes and the respect due to them in order to follow their own ideas. They indulged in business transactions and owned vast stretches of land. They gave feasts and indulged in the consumption of liquor, and, though they pretended to be practising the teachings of the Buddha, their practices were probably of a tantric nature. It would appear that they had a considerable amount of influence at the royal court and one of the main exponents of the movement was even given the title of royal teacher. Superstition and magic were gaining dominance once again and Anawratha's and Kyanzitta's empire was slowly sliding into decadence.

The last king of Pagan, Narathihapate, whom the Myanmar know by the name Tayoupyemin[29] (the king

28. Cf. Than Tun, op. cit.

29. The Myanmar word for Chinese to this day is *teyou* or *tarou* which is derived from "Turk," for the Mongols are ethnic Turks.

who fled the Chinese), repeatedly refused to pay symbolic tribute to the Mongol emperors in Peking who in 1271 had conquered neighbouring Yunnan. He even went so far as to execute ambassadors of the Chinese emperor and their retinue for their lack of deference to the king. He became so bold and blinded by ignorance that he attacked a vassal state of the Mongols. The emperor in Peking was finally forced to send a punitive expedition which defeated the Pagan army north of Pagan. The news of this defeat caused the king and his court to flee to Pathein (Bassein). As the imperial court in Peking was not interested in adding Pagan to its possessions, the Yunnan expedition did not remain in the environs. When the king was later murdered and the whole empire fell into disarray, the Yunnani generals returned, looting Pagan. The territories were divided amongst Shan chiefs who paid tribute to the Mongols.

G.E. Harvey honours the kings of Pagan with the following words:

> To them the world owes to a great measure the preservation of Theravāda Buddhism, one of the

purest faiths mankind has ever known. Brahmanism had strangled it in its land of birth; in Sri Lanka its existence was threatened again and again; east of Burma it was not yet free from priestly corruptions; but the kings of Burma never wavered, and at Pagan the stricken faith found a city of refuge.[30]

Contacts with Sri Lanka and the First Controversies

The contact with Sri Lanka was very important for the growth of the religion in Pagan. As was shown previously, it started with the friendship of Anawratha and Vijayabāhu, both of whom fought for Buddhism: Anawratha to establish a new kingdom, Vijayabāhu to wrench an old one from the clutches of the Hindu invaders. They supported each other in their struggles and then together re-established the Theravāda doctrine in their respective countries, Anawratha sending bhikkhus to Sri Lanka to revive the Saṅgha, while Vijayabāhu reciprocated by sending the sacred texts. The continued contact between the two countries

30. G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 70.

was beneficial to both: many a reform movement, purifying the religion in one country spread to the other as well. Bhikkhus visiting from one country were led to look at their own traditions critically and to reappraise their practice of the Dhamma as preserved in the Pāli texts. After the fall of the main Buddhist centres in southern India, centres which had been the main allies of the Mon Theravadins in the south, Sri Lanka was the only ally in the struggle for the survival of the Theravāda tradition.

Leading bhikkhus of Pagan undertook the long and difficult journey to Sri Lanka in order to visit the holy temples and study the scriptures as they had been preserved by the Sinhalese Saṅgha. Shin Arahan's successor as the king's teacher left the royal court for Sri Lanka, returning to Pagan only to die. He was succeeded by a Mon bhikkhu, Uttarajīva, who led a pilgrimage to Sri Lanka in 1171. This was to cause the first upheaval in the Saṅgha of Pagan.

Uttarajīva travelled to Sri Lanka accompanied by Chapada, a novice who remained behind on the island

in order to study the scriptures in the Mahāvihāra, the orthodox monastery of Sri Lanka and the guardian of the Theravāda tradition. After ten years, he returned to Pagan accompanied by four elders who had studied with him. The Kalyāṇī inscription, written about three hundred years later, relates that Chapada considered the tradition of the Myanmar bhikkhus impure. He had consequently taken four bhikkhus with him because he needed a chapter of at least five theras in order to ordain new bhikkhus. It is possible that the Myanmar bhikkhus, who seemed to have formed a group separate from the Mon bhikkhus, had paid more attention to their traditional worship than was beneficial for their practice of the Dhamma. It is also possible that there was an element of nationalist rivalry between the Mon bhikkhus and the Myanmar bhikkhus. As he showed a penchant for the reform movement, the Myanmar king Narapati seems to have accepted the superiority of the Mon bhikkhus, though he did not neglect the other bhikkhus. Chapada and his companions refused to accept the ordination of the Myanmar bhikkhus as legitimate in accordance with Vinaya. They established their own ordination,

following which the Myanmar bhikkhus sent a delegation to Sri Lanka to receive the Mahāvihāra ordination for themselves.

After Chapada's death, the reform movement soon split into two factions, and eventually each of the four remaining bhikkhus went his own way, one of them leaving the order altogether. "Thus in the town of Arimaddana (Pagan) there were four schools.... Because the first of these to come was the school of the Elder Arahan from Sudhamma (Thaton) it was called the first school; while the others, because they came later, were called the later schools."[31]

Scholarship in Pagan

It is surprising how quickly a relatively simple people absorbed the great civilisation that arrived in their midst so suddenly. Even before the conquest of Thaton, Pagan possessed some ornate religious buildings, which is indicative of the presence of artists and

31. *History of the Buddha's Religion*, p. 74.

craftsmen. It is quite likely, however, that these were Indians from Bengal and the neighbouring states. The type of Buddhism that had come to Pagan from India was an esoteric religion, as some old legends indicate. It was the jealously guarded domain of a group of priests, who made no attempt to instruct the people but were happy if their superiority remained unquestioned by a superstitious populace.

The advent of Theravāda Buddhism with its openness and its aim to spread understanding must have been quite revolutionary in Pagan and obviously the people were eager to acquire the knowledge offered to them by the bhikkhus. Mabel Bode says in her *Pāli Literature of Burma*:

> Though the Burmese began their literary history by borrowing from their conquered neighbours, the Talaings (Mon) — and not before the eleventh century — the growth of Pāli scholarship among them was so rapid that the epoch following close on this tardy beginning is considered one of the best that Burma has seen.[32]

32. *Pāli Literature of Burma* (reprint: London, 1966), p. 14.

The principal works of the Pagan period still extant are Pāli grammars. The most famous of these is the *Saddanīti*, which Aggavaṃsa completed in 1154. Uttarajīva gave a copy of this work to the bhikkhus of the Mahāvihāra in Sri Lanka and it "was received with enthusiastic admiration, and declared superior to any work of the kind written by Sinhalese scholars." The *Saddanīti* is still used to teach grammar in the monasteries in Myanmar and has been printed many times. B.C. Law regards it as one of the three principal Pāli grammars along with the grammars by Kaccāyana and Moggallāna. K.R. Norman says: "The greatest of extant Pāli grammars is the *Saddanīti*, written by Aggavaṃsa from Arimaddana [Pagan] in Burma…."[33] Aggavaṃsa was also known as the teacher of King Narapatisithu (1167–1202) and was given the title Aggapaṇḍita. Unfortunately, no other works by this author are known today.

The second famous author of Pagan was Saddhamma-jotipāla who has been previously mentioned under his

33. K.R. Norman, *Pāli Literature* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983), p. 164.

clan name of Chapada. He was a disciple of Uttarajīva and is credited with a great number of works, but in the case of some it is doubtful whether he actually composed them himself or merely introduced them from Sri Lanka.[34] His works deal not only with grammar, but also with questions of monastic discipline (Vinaya) and the Abhidhamma, which in later centuries was to become a favourite subject of Myanmar scholars. His work on Kaccāyana's grammar, the *Suttaniddesa*, formed the foundation of his fame. However, his specialty would appear to have been the study of Abhidhamma, as no less than four noted works of his on the subject attained fame: *Saṃkhepavaṇṇanā*, *Nāmacāradīpanī*, *Mātikatthadīpanī*, and *Paṭṭhānagaṇānaya*. According to the Piṭaka-thamain, a history of Buddhism in Myanmar, he also devoted a commentary to the *Visuddhimagga* by Buddhaghosa called the *Visuddhimagga-ganthi*.[35]

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34. Ven. A.P. Buddhadatta, in his *Corrections to Geiger's Mahāvaṃsa and Other Papers*, offers an argument that there were in fact two Chapatas and that the one called Saddhammajotipāla, who wrote on the Abhidhamma, probably dates from the late fifteenth century. The Sāsanavaṃsa mentions a contemporary second Chapata who was a shameless bhikkhu.

35. Piṭaka-thamain, p. 37.

There are no written records that refer to meditation being practised in Myanmar before this century. However, his interest in the *Visuddhimagga* is indicative of an interest in meditation, if only in the theory rather than in the practice.

Another scholar of Pagan, Vimalabuddhi, also wrote a commentary concerning Abhidhamma, the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgahaṭīkā*, in addition to another important grammatical work, the *Nyāsa*, a commentary on Kaccāyana's grammar.

Other grammatical works of some importance were written, but none acquired the standing of Aggavaṃsa's *Saddanīti*. However, a rather peculiar work worth mentioning is the *Ekakkharakosa* by Saddhammakitti. It is a work on Pāli lexicography enumerating words of one letter.

Chapter 5
Shan Rule

Upper Myanmar

After Narathihapate had fled Pagan in fear of the Mongol army, he was never able to re-establish his authority, even though the Mongols supported the Pagan dynasty. The Mongol court in Peking preferred a united neighbouring country under a single ruler, but in spite of its efforts Myanmar was divided into several principalities mainly under Shan tribal leaders. These self-styled princelings paid tribute to the Chinese Mongol court and were nominally its subjects. The Shan, at this time still nomadic tribes in the north, broke into an already destabilized Myanmar like a tidal wave. They penetrated the entire region as far as the Mon country and established themselves as rulers in many towns and cities. The intrigues, fratricidal wars, and murders that make up the history of their courts are innumerable.

A division of the country into Upper and Lower Myanmar is somewhat arbitrary, as, after the fall of Pagan, the two regions were composed of many competing principalities. However, there were the two principle kingdoms of Ava in Upper Myanmar and Pago (Pegu) in Lower Myanmar. Hostilities between these two prevailed, as well as with the neighbouring smaller states including the Shan fiefs of Chiang Mai and Ayutthaya in Thailand. Intrigues within and between courts were rife. Sometimes these claimed victims only within the circle of the powerful and mighty, and sometimes whole towns were looted and destroyed, and their population massacred or carried off into slavery. But, in spite of politically unsettled conditions, the Saṅgha survived, because the new rulers, initially somewhat barbaric, soon accepted the religion of their subjects. Just as the Myanmar had adopted the religion and culture of the more refined Mon, so the Shan submitted to the sophisticated civilisation of the peoples they subjugated. The Shan initially established their capital at Pinya in Upper Myanmar to the north of Pagan and transferred it to Ava in 1312. Ava was to remain the capital of Upper Myanmar until the eighteenth century.

The *Sāsanavaṃsa* praises Thihathu, the youngest of three Shan brothers who wrested power from the Pagan dynasty in Upper Myanmar, as a Buddhist king who built monasteries and pagodas. He had a bhikkhu as his teacher and supported thousands of bhikkhus in his capital Pinya and later Ava. However, Pagan remained the cultural and religious capital of the region for the whole of the fourteenth century. Scholarly works were composed in its monasteries throughout this period whereas no such works are known to have been written in the new centres of power. The works of this period of scholarship were mostly concerned with Pāli grammar.

Two generations later, a descendant of Thihathu secured himself a place in religious history as a great patron of scholarship. As in the courts of some previous kings, his court was also devoted to scholarly learning; and not only bhikkhus, but also the palace officials, produced treatises on religious subjects and the Pāli language.

Although the political situation remained unsettled in Upper Myanmar throughout the fifteenth century, in the main, this affected only those in power and their usurpers. Consequently the Saṅgha appears to have flourished, while the traditional devotion to the support of the Saṅgha through gifts of the four requisites remained unchanged. The royal court, followed by the leading families, made great donations of monasteries, land, and revenue to the bhikkhus.

In approximately 1440, two Mahātheras from Sri Lanka settled in Ava.[36] Here they joined a group of famous scholars, of whom Ariyavaṃsa was the most outstanding. The *Sāsanavaṃsa* tells us of his great wisdom and humility in an anecdote.[37]

The elder Ariyavaṃsa had studied the books of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, but felt he had not gained real understanding. Eventually he came to a bhikkhu in Sagaing who kept his mouth always filled with water

36. See *History of the Buddha's Religion*, p. 95.

37. Ibid, pp. 102–104.

in order not to have to engage in meaningless chatter. Ariyavaṃsa did not talk to “the Elder Water-bearer,” as this bhikkhu was known in the Myanmar language, but simply performed the duties of a disciple to his teacher for two days. On the third day, the Venerable Water-bearer spat out the water and asked Ariyavaṃsa why he was serving him. When Ariyavaṃsa told him that he wanted to learn from him, the Venerable Water-bearer taught him the *Abhidhammattha-vibhāvanī-ṭīkā*, a subcommentary on the *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha.* After two days, Ariyavaṃsa grasped the meaning and his teacher asked him to write a commentary on this book in order to help others to gain understanding.

During the composition of his first work, Ariyavaṃsa submitted his writings to the assembled bhikkhus on every Uposatha day, reading out what he had composed and asking his brethren to correct any mistakes they found. On one occasion, a visiting bhikkhu twice made a sound of disapproval during the reading. Ariyavaṃsa carefully noted the passages where the sound of disapproval had occurred. On reflecting on them in the evening, he found one error

of grammar where he had used the wrong gender and also a repetition, an error of style. He approached the bhikkhu who had made the sounds during the reading and out of gratitude for the correction gave him his own outer robe.

Ariyavaṃsa composed several works in Pāli: works on the Abhidhamma, on grammatical subjects, and a study of the Jātakas. But his very important contribution to Buddhism in Myanmar was the fact that all his writing was in the Myanmar vernacular. He was probably the first bhikkhu to write treatises on religious subjects in the local idiom, thus making the religion accessible to a greater number of people. The work by Ariyavaṃsa still known today is a commentary on the anuṭīkā (sub-commentary) of the Abhidhamma.

Towards the end of the fifteenth century, a bhikkhu by the name of Sīlavaṃsa composed several epic poems in Pāli. They were, of course, of a religious nature dealing with subjects such as the life of the Buddha, or Jātaka stories. This genre was later very popular in the

Myanmar language and there are many poems relating Jātaka stories which were sung by bards throughout the country until recently. In the *Sāsanavaṃsa*, however, Paññāsāmi disapproves of bhikkhus writing or reciting poetry as he considers it to be in breach of the Vinaya rules. He says that because of this, Sīlavaṃsa's name was excluded from the Theraparamparā, a listing of eminent bhikkhus of Myanmar by ancient chroniclers.

Lower Myanmar

The Mon civilization in Lower Myanmar flourished after Pagan's importance waned, once again reliving the era of glory that it had experienced prior to Anawratha's conquest.

Wareru, the Shan ruler who had established himself in Martaban in 1287, was soon converted to Buddhism. He was a Shan peddler who had astutely wrested power from a son of the last king of Pagan, a son who

had revolted against his father and founded an independent kingdom. Under Wareru's rule, scholarship in the Mon monasteries flourished and a code of law was compiled which still forms the foundation of the legal literature of Myanmar. The Mon bhikkhus based this code on ancient Hindu codes of law which had found their way into Mon tradition through Indian colonisers and merchants.

At the beginning of the fourteenth century two respected Mon theras named Buddhavaṃsa and Mahānāga revived the tradition of their countryman Chapada in making a pilgrimage to Sri Lanka. There, they accepted new ordination in the Mahāvihāra monastery, the guardian of Sinhalese orthodoxy. The bhikkhus of the Mahāvihāra asked those ordained in other countries to revert to the lay-state before being re-ordained as novices and full bhikkhus, as it was considered of the utmost importance that the ordination be handed down in an unbroken tradition from the time of the Buddha. This was especially significant in Myanmar where there were some reservations about the continuity of the tradition. By

disrobing, a bhikkhu forgoes the seniority he has acquired through the years spent in robes and, in this case, he also states that he considers his former ordination invalid. One can imagine that such a step is not taken lightly but only after careful consideration.

The Great Reformation of the Saṅgha

King Dhammazedi (1472–92) takes a special place in the history of the religion in Myanmar. He unified the Saṅgha in the Mon country and purified the order of the bhikkhus. He recorded his great service to the country in the Kalyāṇī inscription, which will be quoted below.

Dhammazedi was a bhikkhu of Mon origin who taught one of the queens at the royal palace in Ava. This lady, Shin Sawbu, was the daughter of the king of Pago. She had been queen to several unfortunate kings of Upper Mynamar and had beeen conveyed into the hands of the subsequent kings along with the throne. She had

become disenchanted with the life of a queen and desired to return to her native land. Dhammazedi and a fellow Mon bhikkhu helped her to escape and brought her back to Pago. Eventually she became queen of Pago , but after reigning only a few years she wished to retire and do works of merit. She found that the only people worthy of the throne of Pago were her teachers, the two bhikkhus. She let fate decide which would be the future king by concealing miniature imitations of the regalia in one of the two bowls in which she offered them their daily alms food.

She handed the throne over to Dhammazedi who had received the fateful bowl and spent the rest of her life at Dagon (Yangon) building the terrace around the Shwedagon Pagoda and gilding the sacred mound. The Shwedagon became what it is today chiefly thanks to Shin Sawbu's munificence.

Dhammazedi assumed government in Pago after leaving the Order of the bhikkhus. He moved the capital closer to the Swemawdaw Pagoda and built several pagodas and shrines. His name is also

connected with a collection of wise judgements and the translation of Wareru's Code of Law into the vernacular. In 1472, Dhammazedi sent a mission to Bodhgaya to repair the temple and make plans and drawings of it.

Dhammazedi had received his education in monasteries of Ava which adhered to the Sihala Saṅgha. The Sihala Saṅgha was the faction of the Saṅgha of Myanmar that accepted only the Mahāvihāra of Sri Lanka as the ultimate authority in religious questions. King Dhammazedi knew from direct experience the state of the Saṅgha in Lower Myanmar and was determined to improve it. Having lived as a bhikkhu for so many years, he was also singularly qualified to change the Saṅgha for the better.

He chose twenty-two senior bhikkhus to lead the reform movement and informed them:

> Reverend Sirs, the *upasampadā* ordination of the bhikkhus of the Mon country now appears to us to

> be invalid. Therefore, how can the religion, which is based on such invalid ordination, last to the end of 5000 years? Reverend Sirs, from the establishment of the religion in the island of Sri Lanka up to this present day, there has been existing in this island an exceedingly pure sect of bhikkhus…. Receive at their hands the *upasampadā* ordination… and if you make this form of the *upasampadā* ordination the seed of the religion, as it were, plant it, and cause it to sprout forth by conferring such ordination on men of good family in this Mon country…. Reverend Sirs, by your going to the island of Sri Lanka, much merit and great advantage will accrue to you.[38]

At the beginning of 1476 the chosen bhikkhus with their twenty-two disciples embarked on the journey to Sri Lanka. They sailed in two ships, one taking about two months while the other needed six full months to arrive on the shore of the Buddhist island. They received the *upasampadā* ordination at the Mahāvihāra from 17th to 20th July 1476. The return journey of the forty-four Mon bhikkhus was not so

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38. Kalyāṇī inscription, *Epigraphica Birmanica*, Vol. III, Pt. 2, pp. 220–21.

smooth, however. One group arrived home in August 1476, while the other group took three years to return to Pago and ten of the bhikkhus died en route. Following their return, Dhammazedi had a pure ordination hall (*sīmā*) consecrated and made the following proclamation:

> May all those who possess faith and desire to receive the bhikkhu's ordination at the hands of the bhikkhus ordained in Sri Lanka come to the Kalyāṇī sīmā and receive ordination. Let those who have not faith and do not desire to receive the bhikkhus ordination of the Sinhalese, remain as they are.[39]

In order to confer the bhikkhu ordination outside the middle country (i.e. northern India), a chapter of five bhikkhus is needed, one of whom must be qualified to serve as preceptor (*upajjhāya*) and another as teacher (*ācariya*). The latter two must have spent at least ten years in robes as fully ordained bhikkhus. So if Dhammazedi wanted to have local bhikkhus ordained in the new ordination, it was necessary to find two

39. Ibid, p. 249.

senior bhikkhus. Since those returning from Sri Lanka had been ordained for a period of only three years, they could not act as preceptor or teacher. Local bhikkhus who had not received the ordination of the Mahāvihāra in Sri Lanka were unacceptable, as otherwise the ordination would again have been invalidated by one who was not of pure descent. Fortunately, the two theras who had undertaken a pilgrimage to Sri Lanka at the beginning of the century and had received the Sinhalese ordination at that time, were still alive. As a result, one was able to act as preceptor and the other as teacher of the newly ordained bhikkhus. The stage was now set for the reformation and unification of the Mon Order of bhikkhus and soon the re-ordination of almost the entire Order of bhikkhus began. The Kalyāṇī inscription records the number of 15,666 ordinations in hundreds of ordination halls newly constructed for the purpose.

It is interesting to note how forcefully the king reformed the Order through royal decrees that would hardly be tolerated today. He declared that all

bhikkhus who were, for example, practising medicine or other arts and crafts or who even slightly infringed on the Vinaya rules would be expelled. The king as a layman, however, did not have the power to defrock a bhikkhu who had not broken one of the four Pārājika rules.[40] Dhammazedi circumvented this by threatening to punish with royal penalties the mother, father, relatives, and lay supporters of bhikkhus whose behaviour was not in accordance with the rules of the Vinaya.

It goes without saying that a king who could allow himself to take such drastic measures in regard to the Saṅgha must have had the support of a broad section of the Order and also the people. After years spent in robes, he was keenly aware of the problems of monastic life and because of this even senior bhikkhus respected and accepted his council. We can assume that all his actions to reform the Order were firstly discussed with his bhikkhu teachers and then

40. A bhikkhu who kills a human being, has sexual relations, falsely claims to have attained superhuman achievements, or steals automatically ceases to be a bhikkhu and therefore even a layman can take his robes away.

implemented with their blessings. There being no such thing as a Buddhist Church with a central authority, the Saṅgha has little possibility to regulate itself. Only the committed support of a worldly power can protect the Order of bhikkhus from those who take advantage of the respect that is given to the yellow robe.

Dhammazedi's support for the religion was so great that his fame spread well beyond the borders of Myanmar and bhikkhus from neighbouring countries such as Thailand came to his realm to receive ordination there. Though the reform movement did not spread to Upper Myanmar and cause the same mass ordinations there, it did not remain without influence in the kingdom of Ava and other principalities, and many bhikkhus came to the Mon bhikkhus to receive the Kalyāṇī ordination.[41]

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41. The forty-four Myanmar bhikkhus were ordained in Sri Lanka in a water sīmā, a place of ordination floating on the water, on the Kalyāṇī river. The first ordination hall built by Dhammazedi near Pegu was therefore called the Kalyāṇī Sīma and the Sinhalese ordination the Kalyāṇī ordination. Ibid, p. 249.

Chapter 6
The Myanmar Build an Empire

Shan versus Myanmar

The beginning of the sixteenth century was one of the most difficult periods for Buddhism in Upper Myanmar. While the religious fervour of Dhammazedi still lived on in the kingdom of Pago in Ava, Shan rulers were endeavouring to bring about the destruction of the Saṅgha. A Shan king named Thohanbwa (?1527–1543) was particularly well-known for his barbarity. He destroyed pagodas and monasteries and robbed their treasures. Although he was a king, he was uneducated and ignorant. Hence fearing the influence of the bhikkhus and suspicious of their moves, he brought about the massacre of thousands. Under these terror regimes of the Shan rulers the Myanmar did not feel safe. Many, including learned bhikkhus, fled to Toungoo, the stronghold of the Myanmar race in the south. Despite the anarchy

prevailing, some respected treatises on Pāli grammar were written in Upper Myanmar in these years.

Better times, however, lay ahead for Buddhism in the Golden Land. Two successive kings of Myanmar origin from Toungoo would unite the country and fulfil the duties of Buddhist kings. The wars fought by these two kings, King Tabinshwehti (1531–50) and King Bayinnaung (1551–81), were long in duration and exceedingly cruel. They succeeded in gaining control of the Mon kingdom in Lower Myanmar and the kingdom of Ava. They conquered all of what is today Myanmar including the Shan states as far east as Chiang Mai, and made incursions into lower Thailand and Yunnan where some kings paid tribute to the Myanmar court.

Bayinnaung deferred to the Mon as far as culture and religion were concerned and dressed in Mon style. Under his royal patronage, the Mon Saṅgha produced scholarly works on grammar and the Abhidhamma and also helped with the collection and standardisation of a code of law based on the old Mon code compiled during Wareru's reign.

Bayinnaung not only unified the country politically, but also made Buddhist principles the standard for his entire dominion. He forbade the sacrificial slaughter of animals, a custom still practised by the Shan chiefs, the worshippers of certain spirits, and the followers of some other religions. He built pagodas and monasteries in all the newly conquered lands and installed learned bhikkhus in order to convert the often uncivilised inhabitants to gentler ways. The main religious building of his reign is the Mahāzedi Pagoda, a majestic monument to the Buddha in the capital, Pago. He also crowned the main pagodas in Myanmar with the jewels of his own crown, a custom practised by many rulers of the country. He continued in the tradition of Dhammazedi, in supporting the Sihala Saṅgha and in sponsoring the ordination of many bhikkhus in the Kalyāṇī Ordination Hall near Pago. It is said that he built as many monasteries as there were years in his life.

It remains a mystery how a king who had such deep devotion to the religion of the Buddha and who was so generous towards it could spend his life fighting

campaign after campaign to expand his realm. He caused bloodshed and suffering in the conquered regions and at home people starved because farmers were drafted into the army. However this may be, Bayinnaung seems to have been able to reconcile fighting expansionist wars with being a pious Buddhist.

After King Bayinnaung, Pago rapidly lost its significance. Bayinnaung's son persecuted the Mon and consequently re-ignited racial tensions that would plague Myanmar for centuries. Later, Pago was to fall into the hands of a Portuguese adventurer who pillaged the pagodas and monasteries. Eventually the whole of Lower Myanmar, already depopulated by the incessant campaigns of Bayinnaung and his successors, was pillaged by all the surrounding kings and princelings. The country was devastated and people starved.

The *Sāsanavaṃsa* records one major problem of the Vinaya during the sixteenth century. At the beginning of the century, the bhikkhus of Toungoo were divided

over whether or not bhikkhus could partake of the juice of the toddy palm which was generally used to prepare fermented drink. The dispute was settled by a respected thera who decided that toddy juice was permissible only if it was freshly harvested.

Political Influence of the Saṅgha in Early Myanmar

What motivated the royal court probably remained largely a mystery to the ordinary citizens, except when they were pressed into service in the king's army. There was little sense of collective responsibility as it is cultivated in today's democracies. Everyone looked after himself and his immediate circle and governments were sometimes more of a scourge than a protection. Kings did not always provide a visible administration beyond appointing governors at whose mercy local people were. These governors often endeavoured to establish independence as soon as they perceived inherent weaknesses in their masters. Many accumulated great wealth for themselves.

There was, however, one element in the policy of rulers which, with a few exceptions, remained fairly stable throughout Myanmar history. Most kings supported Buddhism and the Saṅgha provided a framework of continuity as no other entity could. Ray writes:

> They (the kings) were good Buddhists and never did they waver from their kingly duty of acting as the patron-guardian of the faith of the country. Moreover, whatever their numerical strength, the bhikkhus were real spokesmen of the people and the monasteries were the popular assemblies as it were; and each king that came to the throne sought to win the bhikkhus over to his side.[42]

The best insurance of a peaceful life in Myanmar was to become a bhikkhu, as they were not drafted into armies or enslaved by conquerors and as long as the lay people had food to eat they were also fed. The bhikkhus not only provided a link between the people and those in power, they often played a role in the

42. Niharranjan Ray, *Theravāda Buddhism in Burma*, p. 212.

affairs of state. This is illustrated by an event which occurred in the middle of the seventeenth century and is related by the *Sāsanavaṃsa*.

The king, Ukkaṃsika, popularly known as King Thalun, was a devoted Buddhist and thanks to him, learning flourished in Myanmar. The king's son, however, tried to dethrone his father, and Thalun, taken by surprise, had to flee accompanied only by two companions. Coming upon a river, the only vessel in sight was the boat of a sāmaṇera. The sāmaṇera agreed to take them onboard as passengers, and they ended up in the sāmaṇera's monastery where they revealed their true identities and asked for protection from their persecutors. They were referred to another monastery where lived a bhikkhu wise in worldly affairs. Following his advice, the bhikkhus formed a living wall around the monastery and, as no Buddhist will attack a man in robes, the rebels who had come to kill the king had to withdraw. Another example of the beneficial influence of the Saṅgha is their appeal for clemency to King Bayinnaung. Bhikkhus often tried to stay executions in accordance with the principles of

mettā (loving kindness) and *karuṇā* (compassion) and sometimes their efforts achieved success.

During one of Bayinnaung's Thai campaigns, the peasantry around Pago revolted and razed the royal city to the ground. Bayinnaung, after hurrying back from Ayutthaya, captured several thousand rebels and was ready to burn them alive. It was the custom then to burn deserters from the army alive and obviously rebellion was considered to be a crime of similar gravity. The bhikkhus of all races intervened on behalf of the poor wretches and were able to save all from the pyre, except for seventy ring leaders, the most serious offenders.

There are several instances in Myanmar history when bhikkhus also mediated between contending kings or princes and helped to avoid bloodshed. This was often the case when cities were besieged and both parties realised that they could not win. The king who was besieged would normally take the initiative and send his bhikkhus to the king in attack. Often the bhikkhus were authorised to negotiate on behalf of the

monarch. An armistice agreed by or in the presence of bhikkhus was more likely to be honoured than a promise given without their blessings. Therefore, if the two parties were sincere in their offers to negotiate, they usually requested bhikkhus to be mediators and judges.

The Spread of Abhidhamma

The seventeenth century was a period of dynamic growth in the history of Buddhism in Myanmar. Many outstanding developments took place, and principal among these were the numerous translations of texts into the Myanmar language and the great increase in the study of the Abhidhamma. It is quite possible that the two developments were inter-connected.

In the first half of the century, Manirathana Thera translated the following texts into the Myanmar language: *Aṭṭhasālinī*, *Sammohavinodanī*, *Kaṅkhāvitaraṇī*, *Abhidhammaṭṭhavibhāvinī*, *Saṅkhepavaṇṇanā.* Of these

five, only the *Kaṅkhāvitaraṇī*, Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Pātimokkha, is not concerned with Abhidhamma. In the second half of the century Aggadhammālaṅkarā translated Kaccāyana's Pāli grammar, the *Abhidhammaṭṭhasangaha*, *Mātikā*, *Dhātukathā*, *Yamaka*, and the *Paṭṭhāna* into the Myanmar tongue. Later, the *Nettippakaraṇa* was also translated.

It cannot be a coincidence that nine out of twelve translated works were texts of the Abhidhamma or its commentaries. The reason for these translations must have been a developing interest in the psychology of Buddhism among the Buddhist followers who could not themselves read Pāli. Whether these were only bhikkhus or whether lay people were also interested in exploring the scriptures for themselves is difficult to determine now. However, what is known is that almost every boy and many of the girls attended monastic schools, whose curriculum was probably established by this period, if not earlier. Included in the curriculum were studies of the Maṅgala Sutta, Mettā Sutta, Ratana Sutta, and the other parittas, as well as basic literacy which included some Pāli. In

addition a number of the Abhidhamma texts had to be committed to memory.

The intention behind these translations and commentaries in the Myanmar language was obviously to make the words of the Buddha accessible to a wider audience who would, then, not be solely dependent on the authority of the Pāli scholars.

In the later half of the century, the bhikkhu Devacakkhobhāsa designed a system for the study and teaching of the *Paṭṭhāna*, the last book of the Abhidhamma, which in Myanmar is believed to be the highest teaching of the Buddha. The king at the time of Devacakkhobhāsa was so impressed by the bhikkhu's proficiency in these higher teachings and by his system of instruction, that he ordered the *Paṭṭhāna* to be studied in all the monasteries of Myanmar. It is not unreasonable to assume that the king himself studied these teachings. Otherwise he would hardly have been in a position to appreciate them and make them compulsory reading for the Myanmar bhikkhus.

This emphasis on Abhidhamma in general and the *Paṭṭhāna* in particular has survived in Myanmar to the present day. The movement, therefore, that began in the seventeenth century is still of great significance for Buddhism there. The *Paṭṭhāna*, for instance, is ubiquitous in Myanmar. The twenty-four conditions of the *Paṭṭhāna* can be found printed on the fans of the bhikkhus, on calendars, and on posters. In some monasteries, the bhikkhus are woken every morning by twenty-four strokes on a hollow tree trunk, while the bhikkhu striking the tree trunk has to recite the twenty-four conditions as he does so. Even little children learn to recite the twenty-four conditions along with the suttas of protection. As the *Paṭṭhāna* is the highest and most difficult teaching of the Buddha, it is believed that it will be the first to be lost. In order to slow the decline of the Sāsana, many people of Myanmar, bhikkhus and lay people alike, memorize the *Paṭṭhāna* and recite it daily.

In Pagan, the Jātaka stories and the history of the Buddha's life were the main subjects of religious study. In later centuries, Pāli grammar and the study of the

Vinaya were foremost on the agenda. Dhammazedi's reform movement drew the attention back to the foundations of all monastic life, the code of conduct for the bhikkhus as laid down by the Buddha himself.

Though stricter observation of the Vinaya would have to be re-emphasised in the future, its foundation was firm enough to insure that progressive reform movements would be instigated within the Saṅgha and not be dependent on external impetus. How far a bhikkhu was allowed to stray from the ideal had been defined in strictures that had become integral to the Saṅgha. Based on this foundation of *sīla* (right conduct, morality), the Saṅgha was now free to give increased attention to higher teachings.

The age of the Abhidhamma had dawned. The Abhidhamma remained no longer the domain of a chosen few, but began to be studied by many. The wealth of translations from the Abhidhamma would suggest that in the seventeenth century it had become so popular that it may have been taught even to lay people. The Myanmar language had developed and

had been enriched with Pāli terms so that it could convey the difficult concepts of Abhidhamma. Civilisation had matured to an extent never seen before. Myanmar was ready to study the analysis of mind and matter as taught by the Buddha. The stage was being set for the widespread practice of insight meditation (*vipassanā bhāvanā*) in later times.

Chapter 7
The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

In the succession of rulers of the eighteenth century some were strong and despotic, while others were ineffective and withdrawn. Some tried to expand their power and fought wars, while others appeared satisfied with existing conditions. There were several wars with Thailand and the population of Myanmar had to bear the deprivations that war invariably brings not only to the conquered, but also to the country where the conquering armies are levied.

After a war between the Mon and the Myanmar in which the Mon initially attacked and then conquered Ava itself, the Myanmar king Alaungpaya (1752–60), who believed himself a Bodhisatta, crushed Mon resistance once and for all. After Pago had fallen into his hands in 1756, Lower Myanmar was devastated and many of the Mon survivors fled to Thailand or were deported as slaves.

Like Bayinnaung, Alaungpaya established a Myanmar empire, at the same time decimating the population of the country by drafting the peasantry into the army for campaigns against Ayutthaya (Thailand) and other countries. The *Sāsanavaṃsa* does not comment on the atrocity of war. War is perceived as it is, cruel and pitiless — but it is the affair of rulers, not of bhikkhus. The manner in which rulers conduct their affairs is entirely their responsibility. Paññāsāmi probably took very seriously the Buddha's injunction that a member of the Saṅgha should not talk about rulers and royal affairs.

The *Sāsanavaṃsa* pays much attention to a controversy which raged in monastic circles throughout the eighteenth century. At the beginning of the century, some bhikkhus began to wear their robes outside the monasteries as they were worn within them, that is, covering only one shoulder. Even when going on their daily alms round, they failed to drape the robe in the traditional way. When challenged as to the orthodoxy of this practice, they produced various interpretations and opinions, but could not validate

their practice through the authority of the scriptures. Different kings endorsed one or other of the two opinions and bhikkhus of the orthodox school even died for their conviction when a king had outlawed the covering of both shoulders.

The most interesting aspect of this historical period of the religion is not so much the actual controversy as the power the king had in religious affairs. The kings of Myanmar were not normally expert in the Vinaya and yet they took the final decision in matters of monastic discipline after due consultation with the leaders of the Saṅgha. In the more than one hundred years that this controversy prevailed, different kings supported the orthodoxy of either view. This shows that this system is not entirely satisfactory. However, the right view which was in accordance with the Vinaya did eventually triumph due to the persistence of the majority of the Saṅgha. Only the worldly power was in a position to regulate the Saṅgha into which undesirable elements entered repeatedly. To keep the Order pure, it had to be always under careful scrutiny and bogus ascetics had to be removed. The kings of

Myanmar in co-operation with the Saṅgharājas[43] and the other senior bhikkhus had established a system of supervision of the bhikkhus by royal officials. In every township, the king's representatives were responsible for ensuring that the bhikkhus adhered scrupulously to the rules of the Vinaya. Bhikkhus who transgressed were taken before religious courts and punished according to the code of discipline.

The controversy concerning the correct manner of wearing the robes came up for arbitration for the last time under Bodawpaya (1782–1819), the fifth son of Alaungpaya. He decided in favour of orthodoxy and thenceforth all bhikkhus had to cover both shoulders on the daily alms round. This ruling created one unified sect throughout Myanmar under the leadership of a council of senior bhikkhus appointed by the king. These were called the Thudhamma Sayadaws and the

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43. *Saṅgharāja* is a position created by the king. The holder of the title is appointed by the monarch. It is the highest position as far as influence at the court is concerned as the king will consult the Saṅgharāja in most religious matters. The Saṅgharāja was usually assisted in his duty by a body (similar to a cabinet) of other senior bhikkhus also chosen by the monarch.

Thudhamma sect has survived in Myanmar down to the present day.

Bodawpaya appointed a chapter of eight eminent bhikkhus as Saṅgharājas, leaders of the Saṅgha, and charged them with the duty to safeguard the purity of the Order of bhikkhus. As a direct result of the discipline and stability created by the work of these senior bhikkhus, the Saṅgha prospered, and consequently scholarship flourished under Bodawpaya's reign.

The name of the Mahāsaṅgharāja Ñāṇabhivaṃsa is especially noteworthy in this respect. Ñāṇabhivaṃsa was an eminently learned bhikkhu who had proven his wisdom even as a young man. Only five years after his ordination as a bhikkhu, he had completed a commentary (*ṭīkā*) on the *Nettippakaraṇa*. Eight years after full ordination, at the age of twenty-eight, he became Saṅgharāja, and then Mahāsaṅgharāja, the title conferred by the king on the highest bhikkhu in his realm. Soon after this, he wrote his well respected "new sub-commentary" on the Dīgha Nikāya, the *Sādhujjanavilāsinī*. At the request of the king, he wrote

a commentary on Buddhaghosa’s *Jātakaṭṭhakathā* and several other treatises.[44]

The king was so devoted to the head of the Saṅgha that he dedicated a “very magnificent five storied monastery” to him and later many other monasteries as well. According to the *Sāsanavaṃsa*, Ñāṇabhivaṃsa was not only a scholar, but also practised the ascetic practices (*dhutaṅga*) sitting always alone. He divided his time between the various monasteries under his tutelage and was an indefatigable teacher of the scriptures.

Scholarship flourished in the reign of King Bodawpaya and Myanmar was able, for the first time, to return thanks to Sri Lanka for nurturing the religion in the Golden Land. The bhikkhu ordination (*upasampadā*) preserved in Myanmar was re-introduced to Sri Lanka where the Sāsana had been interfered with by an unwise king.

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44. For more information on his work, see Bode, *Pāli Literature of Burma*, pp. 79–82.

The Amarapura Nikāya in Sri Lanka

In the later half of the eighteenth century, the *upasampadā* ordination in Sri Lanka was barred to all except the members of the landed aristocracy. This was a result of royal decree probably issued with the support of at least a section of the Saṅgha. However, this was a flagrant defilement of the letter and the spirit of the Buddha's instructions. The conferring of the *upasampadā* ordination is dependent only upon such conditions as the candidate being a man, free from government service, free of debt, free of contagious diseases, and upon his having his parents' consent, etc. Members of the lower castes had now only the possibility of becoming novices (sāmaṇera), a condition that created dissatisfaction. A sizeable section of ordained bhikkhus also disapproved of the royal order, but were in no position to defy it within the country. The only recourse for those of the lower castes desiring the higher ordination was therefore to travel to other Buddhist countries to ordain. At first, missions were sent to Thailand where Dhammazedi's

reforms lived on through the ordination conferred to Thai bhikkhus in Pago and through the scores of Mon bhikkhus who had found refuge in Thailand from the Myanmar armies.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, Sinhalese bhikkhus began travelling to Myanmar to find the pure ordination there. The fame of the then Mahāsaṅgharāja of Myanmar, Ñāṇabhivaṃsa, influenced their choice. Scholarship had developed in all fields: Pāli grammar, the Vinaya, the Suttanta, and the Abhidhamma. Myanmar had, after a long period of development, become the custodian of Buddhism.

The first delegation from Sri Lanka arrived in 1800 and was welcomed with a magnificent reception by King Bodawpaya himself. Ñāṇabhivaṃsa, the wise Saṅgharāja, ordained the sāmaṇeras as bhikkhus and instructed them for some time in the scriptures.[45]

45. Bhikkhus of differing linguistic background used to communicate in Pāli. Even today a visiting Thai bhikkhu will speak with his Burmese brethren in the language of the scriptures.

On returning to Sri Lanka, they were accompanied by five Myanmar bhikkhus and a letter from Ñāṇa-bhivaṃsa to the Sinhalese Saṅgharāja. Five bhikkhus form a full chapter and apparently the Myanmar bhikkhus were permitted to ordain bhikkhus without class distinction. Even today, Sri Lanka possesses three schools, the Amarapura Nikāya, the Siyama Nikāya (Thai school), and the Ramañña Nikāya.

The Amarapura Nikāya was so called because King Bodawpaya had established his capital in Amarapura (between Mandalay and Ava) and the bhikkhus had received their ordination there. The Ramañña Nikāya[46] was presumably founded by bhikkhus who had received ordination from Mon bhikkhus in the tradition of the Dhammazedi reforms and who had fled to southern Thailand from the wrath of the Myanmar kings. Both these schools were allowed to ordain bhikkhus without discriminating against the lower classes. Only the Siyama Saṅgha (the Thai ordination) continued to follow the royal command,

46. The Ramaññadesa is Lower Myanmar, the Mon country.

and ordained only novices of the higher castes as bhikkhus. Missions from Sri Lanka continued to travel to Amarapura to consult with its senior theras and they were all given royal patronage and sent back with gifts of the Pāli scriptures and commentarial texts.

Bodawpaya's Relationship with the Saṅgha

Although King Bodawpaya would appear to have been a pious and devout king, his relationship with the Saṅgha was somewhat problematic. He supported it at times and even used it to extend his own glory, but at times he seemed almost jealous of the respect the bhikkhus received from the people. He realised that the bhikkhus were not respected out of fear, but were held in genuine esteem and affection by his subjects. His jealousy became apparent on different occasions.

At one time, he declared that from then on the bhikkhus were no longer to be addressed by the traditional title "Hpoungyi" meaning "The One of Great

Merit." This form of address was to be reserved for the king. Then again he tried to confiscate land and other goods given to the Saṅgha and to pagodas by previous generations. When the Saṅgharājas could not answer his questions to his satisfaction, he invited the Muslim clergy for a meal to test their faith. He had heard that they were so strict in the observance of their discipline that they would rather die than eat pork. Unfortunately for them, they did not display great heroism as they all ate the pork offered to them by the king. Bodawpaya is also reputed to have been beset by a form of megalomania. He wanted to force the Saṅgha to confirm officially that he was the Bodhisatta of the next Buddha to come in this world cycle, the Buddha Metteyya. On this issue, however, the Saṅgha was not to be bent even in the face of royal wrath. The bhikkhus refused, and the king was finally forced to accept defeat. Another expression of his inflated self-esteem was the Mingun Pagoda near Sagaing. It was to be by far the biggest temple ever built. Scores of slaves and labourers worked on its construction until funds were depleted. However, it was never completed and remains today as a huge shapeless square of millions of bricks.

To his credit, King Bodawpaya imposed the morality of the Five Precepts in his whole realm and had offenders executed immediately. Capital punishment was prescribed for selling and drinking alcohol, killing larger animals such as buffaloes, spreading heretical views, and the smoking of opium. Bodawpaya ruled the country with an iron fist and brought offending lay people as well as bhikkhus to heel. His successors were benevolent, but possibly they could be so only because of the fear his rule had instilled in the populace.

The Fate of Buddhism in Upper & Lower Myanmar

Bodawpaya's successor, Bagyidaw (1819–1837), was the first of the Myanmar kings to lose territory to the white invaders coming from the West. The Myanmar court was so out of touch with the modern world that it still believed Myanmar to be the centre of the world and her army virtually invincible. Hence the king was not unduly disturbed when the British raj, governing the Indian sub-continent, declared war on the King-

dom of Ava in 1824 (Bagyidaw had moved the capital back to Ava). It came to a battle near the coast in which the Myanmar general Mahābandhula achieved little or nothing against modern British arms. The Indian colonial government occupied all of the Myanmar coast as far south as Tenasserim in 1826 and forced the treaty of Yandabo on King Bagyidaw. In the treaty, he was forced to accept the new borders established by the Indian government and pay compensation to the invaders for the annexation of the coast of Lower Myanmar.

However, Bagyidaw made a very important contribution to the development of the Saṅgha and to the literature of Myanmar in general. His predecessor, Bodawpaya, had united the Saṅgha by resolving the dispute relating to the draping of the robe over one or two shoulders. Bagyidaw saw the necessity of creating stability for the Saṅgha. He felt that this could be achieved to some extent by bestowing on it a sense of its own history. He commissioned a work on the history of the religion starting from the time of the Buddha, which was to show an unbroken succession of

the pure tradition from teacher to pupil. Its purpose was to praise the diligent theras and expose the shameless ones.

This work, the *Thathana-lin-ga-ya-kyan*, was composed at the king's request by the ex-bhikkhu Mahadhamma-thin-gyan, a leading member of the committee appointed by King Bagyidaw to compile the famous *Hman-nan-ya-za-win*, *The Glass-palace Chronicle*, a secular history of Myanmar. The *Thathana-wun-tha* (*Sāsanavaṃsa*) *-lin-ga-ya-kyan* was completed in 1831; and in 1897, it was printed in the form of a modern book for the first time in Yangon. Paññāsāmi based his *Sāsanavaṃsa* on this work. About forty percent of the *Sāsanavaṃsa* is straight translation from the original work, about forty percent summaries and paraphrasing of the latter, and only some twenty percent Paññāsāmi's own work.[47] Paññāsāmi states in his introduction to the *Sāsanavaṃsa* that his treatise is based on the works of the ancients (*porāṇa*). The con-

47. For a full discussion of the relation between the *Tha-tha-na-wun-tha-lin-ga-ya-kyan* and Paññāsāmi's *Sāsanavaṃsa*, see Victor B. Lieberman, A New Look at the *Sāsanavaṃsa* (S.O.A.S Bulletin, Vol. 39, 1976), Pt. 1, p. 137.

cept of mental property or copyright had not been born and there was no moral need to refer the reader to sources except to give authority to a statement. The only references that would lend authority to a treatise would be the scriptures, their commentaries, and sub-commentaries, but not a work as recent as the *Thathana-wuntha-lin-ga-ya-kyan.*

The preface to the original work in Myanmar explains the reason for its compilation. The king's representative had many times pleaded with the author to write a history of the succession of [righteous] religious teachers so that the people would not become heretical. Apparently the king felt that the lack of a work recording the history of the pure religion in its entirety left scope for wrong views to arise. But with an authoritative record of the lineage of teachers, bhikkhus could not call on views of shameless bhikkhus of the past anymore in order to support their heresies. This is exactly what had happened again and again through the centuries and especially in the robe-draping dispute. The *ekaṃsikas*, the one-shoulder-drapers, had repeatedly dug out obscure teachers in order to

support their point of view. This was to be made impossible once and for all.

Whether this has been successful is difficult to ascertain without a detailed study of the developments in the Saṅgha since the publication of this work. However, the fact that the original Myanmar chronicle was revised and translated into Pāli for the Fifth Buddhist Council indicates that it was by this time considered a useful tool to put the king's authority behind a well-defined orthodox lineage, thus making it easy to refute heresy by referring to the historical teachers.

Tharrawaddy-Min

King Bagyidaw never overcame his shock over the loss of part of his realm. He was declared insane and was removed from the throne by Tharawaddy-Min (1837–1846), King Mindon's father.

In the reign of Tharrawaddy-Min, another mission from Sri Lanka visited Myanmar and was received by

the Saṅgharāja Ñeyyadhammabhivaṃsa. Ñeyyadhamma instructed the two bhikkhus and the accompanying novice in the teachings and conferred the bhikkhu ordination on the novice. He is known for his critical emendation of the text of the *Saddhammapajjotikā* and its translation into Myanmar. He was also the teacher of the later Saṅgharāja Paññāsāmi, the compiler of the *Sāsanavaṃsa* and one of the most influential theras at the time of King Mindon. Ñeyyadhamma showed the need for a recension of at least some of the Pāli texts by editing the *Saddhammapajjotikā.* His disciple, Paññāsāmi, was to preside over the recension of the entire Tipiṭaka as Saṅgharāja under King Mindon.

Pagan-Min

Tharrawaddy-Min was himself deposed because of insanity by his son Pagan-Min (1846–52), the brother of Mindon-Min. Pagan-Min appointed Paññājotābhidhaja as his Saṅgharāja. In his tenure, scholarship received encouragement as the Saṅgharāja himself wrote a commentary and its sub-commentary in Myanmar on the Aṅguttara Nikāya. Other works of the time, all in

the vernacular, are a translation of the *Saddhamma-vilāsinī* and commentaries on the Saṃyutta Nikāya and the Dīgha Nikāya. This is also the time when the author of the *Sāsanavaṃsa* appears. He started his scholarly career with the translation into Myanmar of a commentary on the *Saddatthabhedacintā*. His next work was a comparison of the existing versions of the *Abhidhānappadīpikā* and the translation of his emended text.

In accord with the pre-eminence Myanmar had achieved in the Theravāda Buddhist world, the kings of the country became less fierce and wars were fewer. The successors of Bodawpaya seem to have shown a genuine interest in religion as well as in improving the administration of the country. Upper Myanmar moved into a period of peace, which meant improved conditions for the bhikkhus.

The first half of the nineteenth century saw the translation of many Pāli texts into the Myanmar language. Almost the whole of the Suttanta was now available in the vernacular and many commentaries

and sub-commentaries on Suttanta, Abhidhamma, and the Vinaya were composed in it. This not only made it easier for bhikkhus with limited linguistic skills to study the texts, but also made them readily accessible to the laity. That people in a peaceful country have more time for the study of religion is obvious and soon Myanmar would see the first Buddhist texts printed on modern printing presses. This made it possible for a great number of people to acquire texts relatively cheaply without having to pay a scribe to copy them laboriously onto palm leaves.

Politically Pagan-Min was no luckier than Bagyidaw, as he lost the provinces of Pathein (Bassein) and Yangon (Rangoon) to the British, who were ever ready to create some pretext for war. So, in 1852, the Kingdom of Ava lost access to the sea and became increasingly dependent on the colonial power. Like his father, Pagan-Min was overthrown in a palace revolt. Although not a leader of the uprising, his brother Mindon was placed on the throne. He did not execute the deposed king as was usually the case after a revolt, but allowed him to end his days in dignity.

The Colonial Administration and the Saṅgha

The occupation by the British forces was of utmost significance for the Saṅgha as the British administration did not grant the traditional protection afforded it by a Buddhist ruler. In accordance with the colonial policy established in India, that the colonial government should be strictly secular, the new lords refused to take on the role of a Buddhist monarch and accept responsibility for the enforcing of the bhikkhus' discipline. Without this, Buddhism in Lower Myanmar soon suffered and offending bhikkhus went unpunished. The colonial administration would recognise its mistake only much later, when it was too late, and when they were not able to establish control in the Saṅgha any longer.[48]

48. In the political struggle for independence the bhikkhus of Myanmar played a significant role. Political activity is, of course, not normally admissible for a bhikkhu. However, as the British administration had failed to fulfil its duties towards Buddhism and the religion was in decline, the bhikkhus felt they had to oppose the government in order to save their culture. When the government suddenly wanted to re-establish authority to keep the bhikkhus in their monasteries, their effort lacked credibility and authority and was not heeded. The colonial government had to resort to imprisoning bhikkhus in ordinary civilian prisons, but it was too late to break the movement of civil disobedience of the young activists, including the bhikkhus.

KING MINDON

Even today King Mindon's reign (1852–1877) is surrounded by the mystique of a golden era in the minds of the Myanmar people. No war occurred during the twenty-five years of his tenure and the king himself is said to have been of gentle disposition and adverse to violence. He even declared a dislike for capital punishment which was customarily inflicted by sovereigns for the slightest disobedience or even disagreement.[49] He was not only held in esteem by his subjects, but even praised by a British envoy. The colonisers' comments on the Myanmar and their kings were usually dictated by a parochial narrow-mindedness and a simplistic view that was only widened by contact with the conquered. Therefore General Fytche's words describing King Mindon are all

49. In times of peace kings would use a eulogistic formula instead of giving the order for execution, like "I do not want to see his face ever again." In times of war the orders were clearer. Sometimes even bhikkhus were executed. Mahādhammarājādhipati (1733–52), for instance, executed the Saṅgharāja and a Brahman because an important Buddha image was stolen. See *The Glass Palace Chronicles* (Hmannan I, 376).

the more impressive: "Doubtless one of the most enlightened monarchs that has ever sat on the Burmese throne.[50] He is polished in his manner, has considerable knowledge of the affairs of state and the history and the statistics of his own and other countries. In personal character he is amiable and kind and, according to his light, religious."[51]

King Mindon transferred the capital from Ava to Mandalay, the last royal capital before the British annexation of the whole of Myanmar in 1886. In the early years of his reign, Mindon strove to improve monastic discipline. Although a system of official investigation of complaints relating to bhikkhus' misdemeanours existed, each king had to take his own initiative in re-establishing order in the Saṅgha.

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50. It was the considered policy of the Indian colonial government to portray the Myanmar kings as cruel villains. It annexed Upper Myanmar under the pretext of liberating a people who were oppressed by an ineffective government, much in the fashion of the Soviets liberating Eastern Europe and Afghanistan. After the annexation of Upper Myanmar, British publications describing the excesses of King Thibaw's court and the relief of the liberated people amounted to a propaganda campaign.

51. Fytche, A. *Burma, Past and Present* (London, 1878).

Mindon found that the attitude of many members of the Saṅgha to their code of conduct was exceedingly lax. He therefore wanted all bhikkhus of his dominions to take a vow of obedience to the Vinaya rules in front of a Buddha image. He consulted the Saṅgharāja who convened an assembly of mahātheras, the Thudhamma Council. As opinions regarding the vow differed, the primate's disciple, Paññāsāmi, had to deliver a religious address in support of the king's views. He reasoned that vows were also taken by the bhikkhus at the time of ordination and that if the king sincerely desired to improve the discipline in the Order, he should be supported. All agreed, and the vow was prescribed.

The greatest challenge King Mindon had to face as a Buddhist monarch was undoubtedly his duty to look after the spiritual welfare of his subjects not only in his own dominions, but also in the parts of Myanmar occupied by the British. Moreover, he and many of the leading sayadaws of his court were increasingly aware that the British were only waiting for an occasion to annex the whole of Myanmar. Mindon's army clearly

would not be able to stand up to the might of the Indian colonial government. Therefore, it was not only important to support religious activities in the occupied territories but it was also essential to prepare the religion for the time when it would have to survive without the support of a Buddhist monarch.

The British had made it clear at the outset that they would not take over the traditional role of the Myanmar kings, that of protector of the Sāsana. The new masters' religion, Christianity, rapidly gained influence through the missionary schools. The schools were popular because their education provided much assistance in securing a job and favour with the colonisers. Christian religious education was a compulsory part of their curriculum.

After the conquest of Lower Myanmar, many bhikkhus had fled north in order to remain within the jurisdiction of the Myanmar kings. Many monasteries in British Myanmar were left without an incumbent and whole villages were therefore bereft of the opportunity to receive religious and general education.

King Mindon, aware of this situation, tried to convince bhikkhus to return to Lower Myanmar in order to serve their people. The king's efforts proved successful and many bhikkhus returned to their places of origin. But soon it became clear that without the king's ecclesiastic officials to control the discipline of the Saṅgha, many bhikkhus developed a careless attitude towards their code of discipline.

The Okpo Sayadaw, from Okpo between Yangon and Pago, had stopped many bhikkhus on their way to Upper Myanmar when the movements of bhikkhus out of the conquered territories was at its peak around 1855. He assembled the bhikkhus around himself teaching that the Saṅgha needed no protection from the secular power if it observed the rules of the Vinaya strictly. His monastery was the birth place of a movement of strict monastic discipline. He also emphasised that mental volition was what really mattered in the religion of the Buddha and that acts of worship done with an impure intention were worthless. He obviously felt that much of the Buddhist practice had become a ritual and that the essence had

been lost. In addition to this, however, his movement also challenged the authority of the king's Council of Sayadaws, the leaders of the unified Thudhamma sect, when he declared their ordination was invalid due to a technicality. As a result, he took the higher ordination anew together with his followers.

The Okpo Sayadaw was not the only critic of the Thudhamma sayadaws. In Upper Myanmar, the Ngettwin Sayadaw criticised many religious practices and maintained that a radical reassesment of religious teachings was necessary. The Ngettwin Sayadaw was also a source of inspiration for the Okpo Sayadaw and other reformers. He had been the teacher of Mindon's chief queen and had also advised the king on many occasions. Interestingly, he was a driving force in a movement in Upper Myanmar that wanted to return to the fundamentals of the religion, but more radically than the Okpo Sayadaw. The Ngettwin Sayadaw, together with many other bhikkhus, left the royal city and went to live in the forest near Sagaing. He started to preach that meditation was essential for all bhikkhus and he required an aspirant to novicehood to

prove that he had practised meditation before he would ordain him. All the bhikkhus around him had to spend a period of the day in meditation and he emphasised that meditation was of much greater importance than learning. He advised lay people to stop making offerings of flowers, fruits, and candles to Buddha images, but to meditate regularly on the Uposatha days. Of course, his instructions that offerings to Buddha images were fruitless and merely dirtied the places of worship, caused considerable unhappiness with the traditional Thudhamma Council and presumably with many ordinary people. However, the Ngettwin Sayadaw never strove to form a different sect by holding a separate ordination as did the Okpo Sayadaw. His reforms were within the community and within a Buddhist society that was presided over by a king. The Okpo Sayadaw had no place for royalty in his view of the world and did not hesitate to confront the system that was still alive, though obviously doomed.

Two other important sayadaws of King Mindon's reign deserve mention: the Shwegyin Sayadaw and the

Thingazar Sayadaw. The Shwegyin Sayadawalso tried to reform the Saṅgha and his movement is still very much alive and highly respected in Myanmar today. He had studied under the Okpo Sayadaw, but when he returned to his native Shwegyin near Shwebo in Upper Myanmar, he avoided controversy in never rebelling against the Thudhamma Council. He introduced two new rules for his bhikkhus, that they must not chew betel and consume tobacco after noon. He also maintained that the Saṅgha must regulate itself without help from the authority, but he never doubted the validity of the traditional ordination ceremony.

The Thingazar Sayadaw was one of the most popular of the great sayadaws of his time. He was also part of the movement to return to the basics of the teachings and greatly emphasised the importance of practice as opposed to mere scholarship. Though he was greatly honoured by the king and made a member of the Thudhamma Council, he preferred spending long periods in solitude in the forest. In the numerous monasteries built for him by the royal family and the nobility of the country, he insisted on the practice of

the purest of conduct in accordance with the Vinaya. However, he did not involve himself in disputes with the extreme reformers or the Thudhamma council. He became very popular through the humorous tales he told in sermons preached in his frequent travels up and down the country.[52]

King Mindon had no easy task. One section of the Saṅgha was pressing for far reaching reforms, yet it was the king's duty to maintain a certain continuity of the traditional ways for the benefit of the people in general. What complicated the situation was the fact that the Saṅgha of Lower Myanmar felt more and more independent of the Buddhist monarch and his Thudhamma council of senior mahātheras. This is illustrated graphically by the Okpo Sayadaw's declaration that the Saṅgha needed no regulation by the worldly power. This view gained popularity also in Upper Myanmar. Luckily, King Mindon's devotion to Buddhism was genuine and he was not deterred by the difficulties confronting him. He was determined not to

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52. Cf. Maung Htin Aung, *Burmese Monk's Tales* (New York & London, 1966).

allow the Saṅgha to split into factions that were openly opposing each other. This he achieved to some extent through careful diplomacy and through the calling of a great Synod, a Saṅgāyana, in the royal city of Mandalay.

The Saṅgāyana, or Buddhist Council, is the most important function of the Buddhist religion. The first Saṅgāyana was held during the first Rains Retreat after the Parinibbāna of the Buddha; the texts to be regarded as authentic were determined at this time. There had been three more Saṅgāyanas since, according to the Theravāda tradition. The council convened by the great Emperor Asoka, whose missionaries brought Buddhism to Myanmar, probably provided the most inspiration for Mindon. The Fourth Council, the one prior to Mindon's council, was held in Sri Lanka in the first century BC, at the Aluvihāra near Matale, for the purpose of writing down the Tipiṭaka, which up to that time had been passed on orally.

King Mindon himself presided over the Fifth Buddhist Council, during which all the canonical texts were

recited and the correct form was established from among any variant readings. The task took more than three years to accomplish, from 1868 to 1871. When the bhikkhus had completed their great project, the king had all of the Buddhist scriptures, the Tipiṭaka, engraved on 729 marble slabs. The slabs were then housed each in a separate small pagoda about three meters high with a roof to protect the inscriptions from the elements. The small shrines were built around a central pagoda, the Kutho-daw Pagoda, the Pagoda of the Noble Merit. To commemorate the great council, King Mindon crowned the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon with a new Hti or spire.

The Fifth Buddhist Council and the crowning of the Shwedagon Pagoda reminded all the people of Myanmar of the importance of their religion, as well as of the fact that the king and the Thudhamma Council of senior monks were still the guardians of the Sāsana. The authority of the Thudhamma Council was greatly enhanced also in Lower Myanmar through the synod. Although the British had not allowed King Mindon to attend the raising of the new spire onto the

Shwedagon, the crowning was a symbol of the religious unity of Myanmar which persisted in spite of the British occupation. The religion was also later to become the rallying point for the Myanmar nationalists who fought for independence from the colonisers.

King Mindon's reign produced a number of scholarly works as well as translations from the Pāli. Ñeyyadhamma, the royal preceptor, himself wrote a sub-commentary on the Majjhima Nikāya, which had been translated by one of his disciples under his guidance. A commentary in Myanmar on the Pāli Jātakas was composed by Medhavivaṃsa and the compiler of the *Sāsanavaṃsa*, Paññāsāmi, put his name to a great number of works. One of the queens of King Mindon requested Paññāsāmi to write the *Sīlakathā* and the *Upāyakathā*. His teacher asked him to compose the *Vohāratthabheda*, *Vivādavinicchaya*, *Nāgarājuppattikathā*. He also wrote a commentary on Aggavaṃsa's *Saddanīti*. Whether all these works were composed by Paññāsāmi or whether they were composed under his supervision and control is difficult

to assess. It is interesting to note that a majority of his works were composed in Pāli, which was no doubt an attempt to encourage bhikkhus not to forgo Pāli scholarship now that Myanmar translations were readily available. The calling of a great Buddhist council to purify the scriptures was part of this movement towards the revival of the study of the original texts.

During King Mindon's reign bhikkhus from Sri Lanka came to Mandalay on several occasions to solve difficult questions of Vinaya and to receive the bhikkhu ordination in Myanmar. After Mindon's death in 1877, his son Thibaw ascended the throne. He was weak and of feeble intellect, and his reign was short. In 1886, he lost his kingdom to the British empire and was exiled to India.

With the complete annexation of Myanmar by the British, an historical era came to an end. Theravāda Buddhism developed in Myanmar over more than two millennia. The visits of the Buddha were the first brief illuminations in a country that was shrouded in

darkness. The worship of the Buddha that is thought to have resulted from these visits and from the arrival of the hair relics, may have been merely part of a nature religion. The pure religion could not endure for long in a country which was yet on the brink of civilisation. Later, however, the teachings of the Buddha were brought repeatedly to those lands by various people.

The visits of the Arahats sent out after Emperor Asoka's council are historically more acceptable than the visits of the Buddha. Their teachings were understood and perpetuated possibly in Indian settlements along the coast and later in communities of people from central Asia such as the Pyu. Through their contact with India, these cultural centres of the Pyu and Mon could remain in contact with Buddhism. At first the important centres of Theravāda Buddhism were in northern India and later in South India and then Sri Lanka. Through repeated contact with orthodox bhikkhus abroad, the understanding of Buddhism grew ever stronger in the minds of the people of Myanmar. The religion was distorted dozens of times through ignorance and carelessness, but

someone always appeared to correct the teachings with the help of the mainstays of the Sāsana abroad. Gradually the role was reversed: instead of travelling abroad for advice, the bhikkhus of Myanmar became the guardians of Theravāda Buddhist teaching and their authority was respected by all. Eventually, when Theravāda Buddhism had long been lost to India and its future was uncertain in Sri Lanka, it found a secure home in Southeast Asia, especially in Myanmar.

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